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Master's Thesis of Chloe Miller

Safeguarding Sovereignty

Evolution of South Korean Opinion on the US-ROK SOFA: 2000-2015

주권 보호

2000 년부터 2015 년까지 한국의 미-한 SOFA 에 대한 의견 변화

August 2024

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Safeguarding Sovereignty

Evolution of South Korean Opinion on the US-ROK SOFA: 2000-2015

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요약

1980 년대, 미국의 전두환 정권에 대한 지원은 주한미군의 과도한 주둔과 주한미군지위협정(SOFA)의 영향으로 인해 촉발된 반미 감정을 한국에서 심화시켰습니다. 2000 년대가 되어서는 미국과 한국 간의 관계가 크게 악화되어 한국전 이후의 영향력을 회복할 수 있을지에 대한 우려가 제기되었습니다. 이 시기는 환경 파괴, 사법 불평등, 그리고 불균등한 부담 분담과 같은 증가하는 문제들로 특징지어졌으며, 이로 인해 많은 한국인들이 미국과 그 군사력을 국가 주권의 장애물로 인식하기 시작했습니다. 대중의 불만은 2002 년 양주 고속도로 사고에서 미군 차량이 두 명의 어린 소녀를 치어 사망하게 한 사건 이후 정점에 달했으며, 이 사건은 SOFA 에 대한 광범위한 항의를 촉발시켰습니다.

그러나 2015 년까지는 주한미군의 주둔과 SOFA 에 대한 한국 대중의 의견이 크게 변화했습니다. 이 변화는 보수적 정권이과 이념이 북한을 보다 긴급한 위협으로 재평가하고, 북한의 공격에 대비한 보안 강화가 필요하다는 전략적 필요성에 의해 영향을 받았습니다. 동시에 중국의 세계적 강국으로서의 부상은 미국 및 일본과 같은 주요 아시아 국가들과의 한국의 관계 강화를 필요하게 되었습니다. 미디어의 표현 변화, 민족주의의 부활, 인구 변화, 그리고 한국의 소프트 파워 강화와 같은 국내 변화의 지원을 받아 SOFA 의 조정이 더 균형 잡힌 파트너십을 반영하고 지역 안보 우려를 해결함으로써 공공의 불만을 줄이는 데 도움을 주었으며, 이는 비대칭 동맹의 방기의 우려에 대한 두려움과 미국에 대한 인식 변화에 더욱 영향을 받았습니다.

키워드: 주한미군 지위협정, 반미주의, 주권, 남북한 보안, 중국의 부상, 아시아로의 전환

Abstract

In the 1980s, perceived US support for Chun Doo Hwan's regime intensified anti-American sentiment in South Korea, primarily fueled by concerns over the US military's overreach and the implications of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). By the 2000s, the relationship between the United States and South Korea had significantly deteriorated, raising concerns about its ability to regain its post-Korean War prominence. This era was marked by mounting SOFA issues such as environmental degradation, judicial inequities, and uneven burden-sharing, leading many South Koreans to view the US and its military as obstacles to national sovereignty. Public disapproval of SOFA peaked following the 2002 Yangju highway incident, where a US military vehicle fatally struck two young girls.

However, by 2015, South Korean public opinion regarding the US military presence and SOFA had significantly transformed. This shift was influenced by a transition in South Korean leadership towards a more conservative ideology, the reassessment of North Korea as an immediate threat, and the strategic need to bolster security against North Korean aggression. Simultaneously, China's rise as a global power necessitated strengthening South Korea's alliances with the US and key Asian nations such as Japan. Supported by domestic changes in media portrayal, a resurgence of nationalism, demographic shifts, and the enhancement of South Korea’s soft power, adjustments to SOFA that reflected a more balanced partnership and addressed regional security concerns helped reduce public resentment. This change was further influenced by fears of abandonment and improving perceptions of the United States.

Keywords: Status of Forces Agreement, anti-Americanism, sovereignty, inter-Korean security, rise of China, pivot to Asia

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I) Introduction

Since the inception of the US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in 1967, debates surrounding the privileges afforded to US military personnel stationed in and around South Korea persist. The Korean argument often entails issues of accountability that have remained inadequately addressed by American authorities, thereby leading to instances of harm inflicted upon South Korea's populace and environmental integrity. Despite legitimate concerns regarding equity and the ethical implications of US military presence, the salience of SOFA-related controversies has exhibited a dynamic trajectory, contingent upon the prevailing global context of the period. For instance, the early 2000s witnessed a surge in anti-American sentiment across East Asia, resulting in widespread disapproval of US military residency, only to observe a subsequent attenuation of such concerns from South Korea's public consciousness as the 2010s unfolded. This trend of diminished public visibility persists to the present day, even when considering the multiple presidential party transitions and the evolving forces of the global order.

Existing literature predominantly focuses on the rise of anti-Americanism in the early 2000s, with insufficient attention given to its subsequent decline, especially beyond the mid-2000s. My research aims to bridge this gap by specifically examining the Status of Forces Agreement and US military involvement in South Korea, offering a focused evaluation of one significant aspect associated with anti-American sentiment during the 21st century. This analysis is further supported by case studies of SOFA protests, notably the Yangju highway incident. By tracking trends over more than a decade, I aim to understand how both internal changes within South Korean society and external factors, such as the geopolitical dynamics involving North Korea and China, influence perceptions of the US military.

This study is guided by three primary research questions. The first question, “Where did early 2000s SOFA movements find their origins?” examines the SOFA's creation and the legal shortcomings that compromise equality. It also explores why SOFA issues gained momentum as political sovereignty became a more pressing concern in the 1990s, culminating in the early 2000s. The second question, “Why have SOFA issues fallen to the wayside from the mid-2000s onward?” seeks to identify the factors that mitigated anti-American sentiment and opposition to the US military presence. The third question, “How should South Korean internal trends be analyzed with respect to the rise and fall of SOFA protests?” aims to assess how changes within Korean society—such as demographics, political and collective beliefs, and local social factors—affect public interpretation of international events, particularly regarding the US military.

Based on these research questions, my findings indicate that the roots of 21st-century anti-Americanism date back to the 1980s. By the 1990s, the Yoon Geumi case intensified pre-existing anti-American sentiment, leading to the formation of broad-based coalitions against US military presence a few years later. These coalitions facilitated the momentum for SOFA protests, with some of them emerging as the most significant protesting forces in the 2000s. As the early 2000s unfolded, the combination of the Sunshine Policy and George W. Bush’s refusal to engage with North Korea further strained US-ROK relations, prompting many South Koreans to question the relevance of maintaining the SOFA. The peak of SOFA-related protests occurred following the 2002 Yangju highway incident.

However, increasing hostility from North Korea led to a decrease in support for the removal of US troops. Additionally, the rise of China provided a strategic rationale for maintaining a US military presence to balance regional power. Recognizing this strategic

importance, South Korea sought to improve relations with both the US and Japan. Domestically, media framing significantly influenced public perception of incidents involving US troops, shaping which events were viewed as severe threats to the Korean people. Furthermore, growing interconnectedness through cultural and economic diplomacy has stabilized US-ROK relations, fostering a balanced partnership. Consequently, with the decline of anti-Americanism and the stabilization of a security-oriented alliance, the urgency for SOFA reform has diminished.

To arrive at these conclusions, I conducted both quantitative and qualitative research. By synthesizing data from past studies, I consolidated information to identify shifts in South Korean public opinion and contextualized these shifts within contemporaneous events. This involved reviewing books, journals, news articles, opinion polls, surveys, and interviews. My analysis of the rise of anti-Americanism followed a chronological approach, while the decline was examined thematically. This methodological switch was necessary due to the multiple, overlapping themes influencing the decline of anti-Americanism and SOFA protests, allowing for a focused examination of each theme's evolution up to 2015 before addressing another aspect.

The study identifies several factors contributing to the waning of SOFA protests in South Korea, including strategic realignments prompted by regional dynamics and political shifts in both countries. These shifts were reinforced by security agreements, economic partnerships, and cultural exchanges, fostering mutual confidence and stability in the US-ROK alliance. This improved perception of the US has led to growing trust among South Koreans, who now view the US military presence as a beneficial security measure, thereby reducing the impetus for SOFA protests. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for maintaining a robust partnership between the US and South Korea, setting the stage for a thorough exploration of existing literature on SOFA and US military presence in South Korea.

1. Literature Review

To provide a robust framework for my research, I have engaged with a diverse array of scholarly sources spanning multiple disciplines. My inquiry began with an examination of the history of the US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement, aiming to discern early deficiencies within the agreement and clarify the underlying causes of resentment. By tracing the origins of the SOFA and its early amendments, this approach seeks to identify initial disparities, pinpoint the areas of greatest contention or, conversely, the easiest areas to acquiesce, and delineate the enduring power dynamics inherent in the agreement.

In Rijie Ernie Gao's publication, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Tensions Between the US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement and the Duty to Ensure Individual Rights Under the ICCPR," the author adeptly highlights the intricate legal complexities surrounding South Korea's obligations under the SOFA with respect to its commitment to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Gao argues that the SOFA undermines South Korea's sovereignty by impinging upon its jurisdiction, thereby posing inherent conflicts with its obligations under the ICCPR. Given that the ICCPR places the onus on member states to safeguard individual rights, any encroachment upon national jurisdiction jeopardizes the fulfillment of this obligation. Consequently, Gao advocates for enhanced transparency in investigations and judicial proceedings on the part of the United States, while also calling for a renegotiation of the SOFA to facilitate more efficacious implementation strategies on the Korean side.[1]

[1] Gao, Rijie Ernie. “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Tensions Between the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement and the Duty to Ensure Individual Rights Under the ICCPR.” *Fordham*

While Gao's analysis addresses the legal ramifications of the SOFA and its implications for individual rights, it is essential to augment this perspective with broader considerations of geopolitical realities and practical outcomes. While legal reforms and renegotiations may address immediate concerns, the efficacy of such measures in approaching real-world challenges remains subject to scrutiny. Therefore, this study seeks to expand upon Gao's recommendations by exploring their practical applicability within the broader context of US-ROK relations, considering power differentials. By synthesizing legal analyses with insights from international relations scholarship, this research aims to provide a thorough understanding of the multisided challenges posed by the US-ROK SOFA. Through an exploration of legal frameworks, geopolitical considerations, and practical outcomes, this study seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the issues surrounding this bilateral agreement.

Next, examination of the historical background provides invaluable insights into the factors causing calls for a reevaluation of the Status of Forces Agreement. In Scott Snyder's work, "Expanding the US-South Korean Alliance," a discernible pattern emerges, particularly regarding apprehensions surrounding the fear of abandonment within the framework of the East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI). Historically, the United States has leveraged its deployed forces as a cornerstone of influence, particularly when South Korea's actions diverged from US interests. However, as South Korea flourished economically and assumed a more prominent role on the global stage, the rationale for such a staunch military presence diminished in the eyes of the Korean populace. The transformation of a nation once ravaged by war into an OECD-level economy illuminated South Korea's ascent, yet the United States failed to adequately recalibrate

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International Law Journal, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 585–647, https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2186&context=ilj.

its perception of its East Asian ally during the early 2000s. Snyder's analysis then highlights the necessity for a model shift within the US-ROK alliance, emphasizing the directive to transcend the traditional patron-client relationship if the alliance is to endure.[2]

Moreover, his insights prompt a deeper inquiry into post-2012 developments after the book's publication, wherein subsequent adjustments within this bilateral relationship may offer further explanation of the trajectory of the alliance. Expanding on Snyder's framework, this study aims to contextualize the discourse surrounding the Status of Forces Agreement within the narrative of evolving public opinion and strategic obligations. By examining how sentiments towards the SOFA mirror broader shifts in attitudes towards military presence – swinging between perceptions of hindrance to economic growth and security reassurance for a sustained alliance – this research seeks to delineate the interactions between military dynamics and diplomatic relations.

To better understand the evolving perceptions of the Status of Forces Agreement in South Korea during the early 2000s, it is of vital importance to delve into the phenomenon of anti-Americanism and its underlying drivers. While the discourse surrounding the US-ROK SOFA garnered considerable attention with regards to human rights issues, anti-American sentiment in Korea has emerged as a popular topic of research for its likely connection to shaping public attitudes towards overall US military presence. In identifying the leading factors of anti-Americanism, scholars have offered insights that extend beyond just the conventional explanations. A contribution to this discourse is found in Youngshik Bong and Katharine H. S.

[2] Snyder, Scott. "Expanding the US–South Korea Alliance." *The US–South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2012, pp. 1–20.

Moon's chapter titled "Rethinking Young Anti-Americanism in South Korea," featured in the book, *The Anti-American Century*. Through meticulous analysis, Bong and Moon delineate the generational divide underpinning anti-American sentiment, challenging simplistic attributions to nationalism. They astutely observe the impact of globalization and the proliferation of foreign cultural influences, which have tempered traditional enmities and fostered a more forgiving understanding among South Korean youth.[3]

Of particular significance is their examination of youth attitudes toward North Korea juxtaposed with their perceptions of the US. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, the youth exhibit discernment in distinguishing between the North Korean regime and its populace. Despite harboring favorable sentiments toward the North Korean people, they vehemently condemn the Kim regime's egregious acts of violence, punctuating a nuanced approach to foreign policy and inter-Korean relations. Similarly, while critiquing the US military presence for its perceived violations of South Korean rights under the SOFA, the youth acknowledge its instrumental role in safeguarding national security interests.[4]

Bong and Moon identify a pivotal juncture in late 2004, marking a perceptible shift in anti-American sentiment and the attenuation of SOFA-related protests.[5] However, the factors behind this paradigmatic shift remain inadequately studied. In my research, I aim to probe the underlying rationales behind this phenomenon, offering my understanding of the evolving contours of public opinion. Although there is compelling evidence suggesting that active warfare

[3] Bong, Youngshik, and Katharine H.S. Moon. "Rethinking Young Anti-Americanism in South Korea." *The Anti-American Century*, edited by Ivan Krastev and Alan McPherson, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2007, pp. 77–107.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

temporarily shifted public opposition away from the SOFA, my argument diverges from this perspective, positing that the conflict in Iraq accounts for only short-term fluctuations. I contend that the current prolonged reduction in SOFA protests is more significantly linked to a state of paralysis experienced by South Korea, which stems from the uncertainty surrounding evolving geopolitical tensions with China and North Korea. By delving into the details of anti-Americanism and its interaction with broader sociopolitical mechanisms, I seek to illuminate the nexus between public sentiment and the discourse surrounding the US-ROK SOFA.

To explore the emergence of discourse surrounding the Status of Forces Agreement more deeply in 2002 and the ensuing public protests, I consulted Kang Jiyeon's scholarly work titled "Corporeal Memory and the Making of a Post-Ideological Social Movement: Remembering the 2002 South Korean Candlelight Vigils." In her extensive study, Kang identifies the Yangju highway incident as the fundamental event that galvanized widespread activism. Following the tragic deaths of two South Korean schoolgirls in an accident involving a US military vehicle, protests advocating for SOFA reform surged to their peak. Kang's investigation includes interviews with both active participants and bystanders of the protests and candlelight vigils, offering valuable insights into their lived experiences.[6]

Through a meticulous analysis of interviews conducted in 2006, Kang presents a unique perspective on the significance of South Korea's candlelight vigils, challenging prevailing interpretations from 2002. Contrary to initial perceptions associating the vigils with a newfound awareness of the US military presence or with celebratory events such as the World Cup, Kang's

[6] Kang, Jiyeon. "Corporeal Memory and the Making of a Post-Ideological Social Movement: Remembering the 2002 South Korean Candlelight Vigils." *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2012, pp. 329–350, https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2012.0014.

research reveals a diverse range of reinterpretations over time. Participants recalled the vigils in connection with experiences like World Cup celebrations as well as high school camps, indicating a shifting sensitivity to ideological implications and establishing the vigils as a preferred mode of protest among the youth. Moreover, reinterpretations within established protest repertoires assert their enduring influence while also suggesting a novel form of dissent that defies conventional categorization.[7]

The significance of the candlelight vigils extends beyond mere expressions of anti-American sentiment, serving as a platform for rearticulating youth experiences and fostering new modes of civic engagement. This reexamination of the protesters' motivations provides valuable context for understanding the evolution of SOFA protests over time. Even at the height of the protests, participants did not espouse a blanket condemnation of American actions. Rather, their involvement may have been driven by a sense of solidarity with their fellow citizens in response to the events of the time. It is essential to avoid oversimplifying the sophisticated motivations behind individuals' participation in these protests and to recognize that discontent with the US military presence was not universally homogeneous among South Koreans.[8]

As I transition from the apex of anti-American sentiment in the 21st century to a period characterized by more subdued discontent, I will utilize empirical data gathered from reputable research polls conducted by prominent news organizations in South Korea. These datasets will serve as invaluable tools for identifying the precise moment at which public perceptions of the United States begin to diverge from previous trends, marking a recognizable shift in attitudes.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

Central to my analysis is the report, "Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the US-ROK Alliance," jointly undertaken by the International Security Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Yonsei University. This detailed study offers insights that challenge certain assertions put forth by Kang Jiyeon, particularly regarding the interpretation of events between 2002 and 2003. While Kang posits that this period represented an indicator in the evolution of South Korea's democratic ethos within, the aforementioned report contends that it signaled a shift in the nation's perception of external risks, with North Korea as a threat receding from public consciousness while the United States assumed a more assertive stance toward the regime in Pyongyang.[9] However, it is worth noting that the report's publication in 2004 predates significant developments such as North Korea's subsequent nuclear weapons tests and the unraveling of the Sunshine Policy, along with the conservative shift in South Korean politics. Consequently, while I concur with Kang's assertion that the anti-American wave of 2002 served as an indicator of deeper societal changes, I also recognize the limitations of the 2004 report in capturing the full extent of these shifts.

Moving beyond 2004, there has been a noticeable decline in prominent displays of anti-American SOFA sentiment, suggesting that the candlelight vigils of that year represented the height of a broader movement for US military reform rather than an enduring trend of strained relations. Moreover, the report's inability to fully analyze the repercussions of the Iraq War enforces the need to extend our understanding of the early 2000s as a paramount period in the

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[9] Mitchell, Derek J., editor. *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/0406mitchell.pdf.

evolution of US-ROK relations. Consequently, I aim to explore the factors that have contributed to the weakening of negative sentiment towards the United States since 2004, identifying 2004 as the first wave in the restoration of the US-ROK alliance.

Further analysis reveals an observable shift in South Korea's geopolitical landscape during the mid to late 2000s, constituting a pronounced second wave of transformation in US military perception. This transition warrants thorough examination, particularly in the context of South Korea's evolving relationships with China and North Korea, and the consequent implications for the US-ROK alliance. Scott Snyder's book, "China's Rise and the Two Koreas," illuminates the elaborate relationship between China's burgeoning economic influence in South Korea and the established political and security coordination between the United States and South Korea. Snyder compellingly argues that China's ascendant economic sway in South Korea poses a formidable challenge to the conventional framework of US-South Korean alliance dynamics. The characterization by Chinese officials of the US-ROK alliance as a relic of the Cold War accentuates the shifting geopolitical currents in the region.[10]

Contrary to past standards, China now assumes a pivotal economic role in South Korea, exerting significant leverage over its security calculus with the United States. However, amidst growing economic interdependence, a palpable apprehension among Koreans about the potential economic dominance by China also pervades the discourse. Snyder further explains that while escalating economic interdependence across East Asia may ostensibly remove the necessity for conventional security measures facilitated by the United States, the specter of strategic entrapment looms large, dissuading South Korea from abruptly severing its military ties with the

[10] Snyder, Scott. *China's Rise and the Two Koreas*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2009.

United States. The vexing North Korean nuclear puzzle further complicates this multifaceted operation, mandating a reevaluation of cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and China. Snyder's incisive analysis thus calls attention to the necessity for a reassessment of the evolving landscape in East Asia, and its ramifications for the enduring US-ROK alliance. [11]

To augment Snyder's analysis, I aim to delve deeper into the intricacies surrounding the emergence of apprehensions regarding economic entrapment by China in South Korea. This entails scrutinizing the factors contributing to this phenomenon and expanding on its implications for the ongoing diminution of discourse surrounding the Status of Forces Agreement into the 2010s. Moreover, I seek to explain how these apprehensions intersect with broader geopolitical settings, particularly in light of the North Korean nuclear issue and the shifting authority structures in East Asia.

Balbina Hwang's, "The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea's Rise" provides much needed supplemental context of the factors influencing both negative perceptions of China and North Korea. In this work, Hwang delves into South Korea's evolving role as a global actor in the context of the US pivot to Asia, shedding light on the geopolitical, economic, and security factors shaping the region's interactions. Highlighted within Hwang's research is the strategic recalibration undertaken by the United States to counterbalance the growing influence of China in the Asia-Pacific region. This pivot stresses the significance of China's substantial defense

[11] Ibid.

spending escalation which has engendered concerns among neighboring countries, including South Korea.[12]

Furthermore, Hwang's analysis expounds upon the ramifications of China's support for Pyongyang, which has emboldened the Kim regime's exemption from punishment and posed challenges to regional stability. Historical tensions between China and South Korea, exemplified by contentious episodes such as disputes over the origins of the Goguryeo Kingdom, reiterate the deep-rooted strategic ambitions in the region. Incidents such as the December 18, 2010 clash involving Chinese fishermen have further strained relations and contributed to negative perceptions of China among South Koreans. Despite China's status as South Korea's largest trading partner, public opinion polls reflect widespread apprehensions about China's perceived military threat, driven by territorial disputes and regional assertiveness.[13]

The tensions over islands in the South China Sea and North Korean provocations in 2010 catalyzed a shift in military strategy towards China, worsening regional tensions. This realignment coincided with leadership transitions in both North Korea and China in 2012, introducing complications to the preexisting regional security landscape. Hwang's analysis defines South Korea's strategic approach as reactive, reflective of its limited capacity to independently influence change. The administrations of Lee Myung Bak and Park Geun Hye navigated this evolving landscape by embracing a more globally engaged approach, epitomized by initiatives such as "Global Korea." Hwang's work provides invaluable insights into the diverse

[12] Hwang, Balbina Y. “The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea’s Rise.” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2017, pp. 71–97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171474?seq=1.
[13] Ibid.

activities shaping South Korea's strategic planning and its relations with China within the broader context of the Asia-Pacific region.[14]

While the previous academic sources listed provide valuable insights into the wavering political perception of the indispensability attributed to the US military presence in South Korea, a prominent gap persists concerning a deep exploration of the public discourse surrounding these developments. Despite scholarly analyses delineating the US military's role as a source of dissatisfaction among segments of South Korean society, scant attention has been devoted to unraveling the mechanisms underpinning the swift and pronounced shifts in public sentiment opposing the Status of Forces Agreement issues. In this analytical undertaking, I intend to invoke the theoretical framework posited by Gi-Wook Shin, as articulated in his paper titled “The Media and the US-ROK Alliance: The South Korean Case,” to interpret historical trends and their implications.

Shin's theoretical premise demonstrates the potent influence wielded by Korean news media, characterized by expansive circulation and a broader national purview relative to their American counterparts, in shaping public perceptions and discourse. By strategically framing narratives to align with the ideological proclivities of their respective readerships, these media outlets exercise considerable agency in shaping the collective consciousness regarding salient societal issues. Shin then conducts an examination of the editorial ethos of preeminent progressive newspaper Hankyoreh and conservative counterpart Chosun Ilbo to determine the thematic focal points accorded prominence, as evidenced by publication frequency throughout the 21st century. This methodological approach affords insights into the differential emphasis

[14] Ibid.

accorded to various topics by each publication, alongside an examination of the discursive strategies employed to frame and contextualize these issues. A nuanced analysis of textual tone, complemented by temporal delineations of thematic shifts in publication, augments the scholarly inquiry.[15]

Supplementing these insights with an examination of how media discourse intersects with historical events, this study seeks to delineate the versatile role played by media in shaping public perceptions and mobilizing civic engagement. Furthermore, while it is important to acknowledge the influential factor of media representation, it is only one facet of a diverse sociopolitical landscape. Accordingly, this inquiry bolsters the imperative for a multi-dimensioned analytical approach that considers demographic shifts, the rise of Korean soft power, and contextual variables over time to fully capture the principles underpinning the evolution of public sentiment vis-à-vis SOFA reform agendas.

2. Origins of SOFA Implementation and Its Flaws

Following the upheaval of World War II and the Korean War, the Republic of Korea confronted the arduous task of post-war reconstruction and the establishment of enduring regional stability. Central to this endeavor was the instrumental role played by the United States in safeguarding South Korea's security interests, notably through the ratification of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953.[16] Embedded within Article IV of the Mutual Defense Treaty was the

[15] Shin, Gi-Wook. "The Media and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: The South Korean Case." *EAI Asia Security Initiative*, May 2011, pp. 1–27, https://doi.org/http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/2011052515462169.pdf.

[16] Snyder, Scott. "Expanding the US–South Korea Alliance." *The US–South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2012, pp. 1–20.

provision granting the United States the prerogative to station military forces on Korean soil. To carry out such measures, the provision was subject to further elaboration and refinement in the subsequent negotiation and ratification of the Status of Forces Agreement.[17] This agreement emerged as a critical legal instrument delineating the rights and responsibilities of US military personnel deployed within the Republic of Korea, while concurrently safeguarding the integrity of South Korea's national sovereignty. [18]

However, the protracted negotiation and eventual signing of the SOFA were contingent upon domestic and international factors such as shifts in Korean leadership and evolving perceptions of South Korea's reliability as an ally in East Asia. It was only with the consolidation of political power under President Park Chung Hee, coupled with South Korea's remarkable economic ascent, its controversial settlement of historical grievances with Japan, and its robust commitment to the US-led military efforts in the Vietnam War, that the United States began to view South Korea as a more dependable and strategic partner in the region. Consequently, these geopolitical dynamics facilitated the negotiation and ratification of the SOFA, culminating in a mutual agreement that underscored the shared security interests of both nations.[19]

[17] "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea." Opened for signature October 1, 1953. *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp

[18] USFK. "The SOFA and You." *United States Forces Korea*, 25 Apr. 2016, www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/I_20160425_The_SOFA_and_You.pdf.

[19] Hyun, Jun Suk, and William Stueck. "The U.S.–ROK Relationship into Full Bloom: From 'Little Strategic Interest' to Alliance Partner, 1947–1966." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2019, pp. 134–136, https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02602002.

Despite the initial promise of the SOFA, subsequent scrutiny revealed significant deficiencies and asymmetries that disproportionately disadvantaged South Korea. This section explores these issues in detail, starting with criminal jurisdiction, followed by environmental responsibilities, and a comparative analysis with the US-NATO SOFA.

Criminal Jurisdiction Under the SOFA

One of the most contentious aspects of the original Status of Forces Agreement between the United States and South Korea is encapsulated in Article XXII, which effectively waived South Korea's primary jurisdiction over criminal offenses committed by US military personnel. This provision stipulated that the US would automatically assume jurisdiction unless South Korea explicitly requested otherwise within 15 days of the offense. Such a clause posed a significant challenge to the traditional norms of territorial sovereignty, which allow a state to assert control over its land, including matters of jurisdictional authority. [20]

The United States' retention of primary jurisdiction over cases involving its military personnel stationed in South Korea poses a potential threat to the administration of justice that South Korea, as a member state of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), is obligated to uphold. The ICCPR mandates that all member states guarantee the individual rights of their citizens. However, US encroachment on South Korea's political sovereignty undermines South Korea's ability to fulfill its commitments to ensuring individual rights and delivering justice to its citizens. As signatories to these binding international

[20] Koo, Jimmy H. "The Uncomfortable SOFA: Anti-American Sentiments in South Korea and The U.S.-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement." *American University National Security Law Brief,* vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 106. *5,* https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=nslb.

obligations, South Korea faces a jurisdictional conflict, effectively relinquishing certain sovereign rights. To address this conflict, South Korea must seek alternative solutions that reconcile its ICCPR obligations with the United States' need to safeguard its military personnel. This balance is crucial for South Korea to uphold its international commitments while respecting the operational requirements of US forces stationed within its territory.[21]

For nearly 25 years following the initial implementation of the SOFA, South Korea persistently advocated for reforms to rectify this imbalance. The turning point came with the 1991 SOFA amendments, which marked a partial resolution to these concerns. Under the amended agreement, both the United States and South Korea were required to mutually request waivers of primary jurisdiction in criminal cases involving US military personnel. Moreover, South Korea was granted the right to contest official duty certificates issued by the US military, although the ultimate decision still rested with the United States if consensus could not be reached within 30 days.[22] These amendments represented a step towards addressing the disparities in jurisdictional control outlined in the original SOFA. However, they also underscored the ongoing complexities inherent in balancing the sovereign rights of host nations with the operational requirements and legal protections afforded to foreign military personnel under such agreements.

Environmental Responsibilities and Facility Return

[21] Gao, Rijie Ernie. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Tensions Between the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement and the Duty to Ensure Individual Rights Under the ICCPR." *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 585–647, https://doi.org/https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2186&context=ilj.

[22] Ibid., pp. 610–615,

Articles IV and V of the SOFA highlight critical issues pertaining to environmental integrity and compensation for affected parties. Article IV stipulates that upon the return of facilities and areas to the Republic of Korea, the United States is not obliged to restore them to their original condition nor compensate for any lack of restoration. This provision prompts questions about the extent of US accountability for environmental impacts resulting from its use of these facilities over time. Meanwhile, Article V mandates that South Korea furnish facilities and areas to the United States without charge, and compensate owners and suppliers where applicable, including for jointly used facilities such as airfields and ports. This requirement reinforces the asymmetrical nature of the agreement, where South Korea assumes financial responsibility for providing and maintaining facilities used by US forces. [23]

These provisions collectively underscore concerns about the adequacy of compensation for environmental damage caused by US military activities on Korean soil. They highlight significant gaps in accountability regarding the environmental impact of US military bases, raising questions about whether the compensation provided to South Korean landowners adequately mitigates the ecological footprint left by US military operations. Overall, Articles IV and V of the SOFA accentuates the need for a more equitable distribution of responsibilities and compensation in addressing environmental concerns arising from the US military presence in South Korea.

Comparative Analysis: US-ROK SOFA vs. US-NATO SOFA

[23] United States Department of State. Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea concerning the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea. 1966. https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Contracting/Contractor%20Links%20Sept%2015/US-ROK%20SOFA_1966-67.pdf

The US-NATO SOFA is considered one of the most equitable SOFAs signed by the US and has served as a framework for subsequent agreements of a similar nature. However, when comparing it with the US-ROK SOFA, notable differences arise, both in legal text and in execution. Under Article XXII, Section 2(a) of the US-ROK SOFA, dependents of USFK soldiers are practically exempt from criminal jurisdiction by South Korea. [24] In contrast, the NATO SOFA under Article 7, Paragraph 2(a) lacks such provision for dependents.[25] The text regarding the criminal jurisdiction of military members is nearly identical in both agreements. However, the US-ROK SOFA expands on Paragraph 3(a) within the concurrent criminal jurisdiction articles, stating that the United States holds primary jurisdiction in cases involving crimes solely against US interests and offenses arising out of official duty. The term "official duty" is not defined in the US-NATO SOFA. In contrast, the Agreed Minutes of the US-ROK SOFA clarify that a "substantial departure from the acts a person is required to perform in a particular duty will usually indicate an act outside of the person's official duty." Additionally, it mentions that a duty certificate issued by an authorized USFK officer is conclusive evidence of official duty for jurisdiction purposes unless successfully contested by South Korean authorities.[26] While this may appear more detailed and potentially fairer than the NATO SOFA,

[24] Ibid.

[25] NATO. "Agreement between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Regarding the Status of Their Forces." *NATO,* 19 June 1951, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17265.htm.

[26] United States Department of State. Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea concerning the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea. 1966. https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Contracting/Contractor%20Links%20Sept%2015/US-ROK%20SOFA_1966-67.pdf

the US is known for quickly issuing official duty certificates, which South Korea usually accepts without question. [27]

Additionally, both the US-ROK and US-NATO SOFAs have similar systems for jurisdictional waivers, intended for issues of significant importance to the sending state. In practice, however, the US often requests waivers indiscriminately, while South Korea almost automatically grants them without thorough consideration. This results in the US retaining jurisdiction over many cases, often leading to minimal penalties for USFK personnel. This perception has led to a belief among South Koreans that the SOFA allows USFK personnel to evade proper prosecution. Similar concerns exist in NATO countries. Addressing this issue requires procedural changes by both the US and South Korea, as further US jurisdictional relinquishment seems unlikely. [28]

However, the US-South Korea SOFA and the US-NATO SOFA, including the US-Germany SOFA, differ significantly in how they handle the return of facilities. Under Paragraph 5(c) of Article LXIII of the US-Germany SOFA, German authorities negotiate terms of compensation and return of facilities. Paragraph 6(c) specifies that if fixtures on the facilities have no practical public use, the US must pay to clear the area. The US is also responsible for assessing, evaluating, and remediating hazardous substance contamination caused by its

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[27] Koo, Jimmy H. "The Uncomfortable SOFA: Anti-American Sentiments in South Korea and The U.S.-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement." *American University National Security Law Brief,* vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 106-110. *5,* https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=nslb.

[28] Ibid.

activities.[29] In contrast, Paragraph 1 of Article IV of the US-ROK SOFA allows the US to return facilities without compensating South Korea for restoration or cleanup costs. Paragraph 2 states that South Korea is not obligated to pay for any improvements made to the facilities, regardless of their practical civilian use. The Agreed Minutes state that the US will respect South Korean environmental laws and remediate contamination posing a known, imminent, and substantial threat to human health.[30] However, this language isn't legally binding, and proving "imminent and substantial" endangerment sets a high bar. The US argues that the improved value of returned facilities offsets cleanup costs, contending that South Korea isn't required to compensate for the property's value. This approach assumes that improvements exceed cleanup costs and have practical civilian uses. In reality, redeveloping military bases for civilian purposes involves substantial additional costs for South Korea, illustrating flaws in the offset approach. [31]

Ongoing Challenges

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[29] NATO. "Agreement of 3 August 1959, as Amended by the Agreements of 21 October 1971, 18 May 1981, and 18 March 1993, to Supplement the Agreement between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Regarding the Status of Their Forces with Respect to Foreign Forces Stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany." *NATO SOFA Supplemental Agreement*, 29 Mar. 1998, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/636e27b28fa8f53587ffb1ed/Supplementary_Agreement_to_the_NATO-SOFA_Germany..pdf.

[30] United States Department of State. Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea concerning the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea. 1966. https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Contracting/Contractor%20Links%20Sept%2015/US-ROK%20SOFA_1966-67.pdf

[31] Koo, Jimmy H. "The Uncomfortable SOFA: Anti-American Sentiments In South Korea and The U.S.-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement." *American University National Security Law Brief*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 110-112. *5*, https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=nslb.

The revelation of these shortcomings often follows detrimental incidents, emphasizing the need for ongoing reassessment and refinement of the agreement to ensure equitable outcomes for all stakeholders. For example, criminal jurisdiction continues to pose challenges in the 21st century, with debates arising over whether US military personnel charged with offenses were carrying out official duties, thereby necessitating trial and sentencing within the US legal system. This often results in lenient, or no punishment compared to if they were tried in a Korean court.

One such notorious case, the 2002 Yangju highway incident, exemplifies these issues and sparked significant public outcry in South Korea during a period of strained bilateral relations. This incident underscores the complexities and implications of the US-ROK SOFA, particularly in how criminal jurisdiction is applied and perceived. While the US-ROK SOFA has provided a framework for managing the presence of US forces in South Korea, it also reveals significant deficiencies that urgently need addressing. Continuous reassessment is essential to ensure that the agreement evolves in a manner that fairly addresses both nations' concerns, particularly regarding criminal jurisdiction and environmental accountability. Only through such efforts can the US and South Korea sustain a robust and equitable alliance amid ongoing regional challenges.

3. Catalyst of the Yangju Highway Incident

The tragic deaths of two schoolgirls in the 2002 Yangju highway incident brought deeply ingrained sentiments of anti-Americanism and SOFA disagreement within South Korea to the forefront, sparking a wave of protests that not only demanded immediate reform of the Status of Forces Agreement but also called for the complete removal of the American military presence in South Korea by the most hardline groups. The inciting event occurred on June 13th, 2002, when 14-year-old Shim Miseon and Shin Hyosun were tragically crushed by a US Army Armored

Vehicle-Launched Bridge (AVLB) operated by driver Sergeant Mark Walker and vehicle commander Sergeant Fernando Nino. The incident transpired as Walker and Nino were en route to a training range located 12 miles north of Seoul.[32] Following the accident, both servicemen were promptly apprehended by US military police for interrogation. In response to the tragedy, the United States swiftly issued statements of condolence, with expressions of regret emanating from high-ranking officials including Lieutenant General Daniel R. Zanini, Commander of the Eighth US Army, and Thomas A. Hubbard, the US Ambassador to Korea. However, such statements came off as insincere to many South Koreans and were severely underreported by Korean media[33]

In the wake of the tragic fatalities involving two young girls, South Korea's Ministry of Justice sought jurisdiction over the case to adjudicate the accused individuals within the civilian legal framework.[34] However, this pursuit faced legal constraints stemming from the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement between South Korea and the United States. Article XXII, Section 3 of the agreement delineates guidelines for concurrent jurisdiction, stipulating that the primary prerogative rests with the United States military authorities over members of its armed forces,

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[32] Kirk, Don. “Road Accident Galvanizes the Country: Deaths in Korea Ignite Anti-American Passion.” *The New York Times*, 31 July 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/31/news/road-accident-galvanizes-the-country-deaths-in-korea-ignite.html.

[33] Murakami, Naoko. “Solidarity in South Korean Civil Movement against the U.S. Forces.” 참여연대, 8 Nov. 2003, peoplepower21.org/english/38523.

[34] BBC News. “US Refuses Korean Justice for Soldiers.” *BBC News World Edition*, 7 Aug. 2002, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2178156.stm#top.

civilian components, and their dependents in cases arising from official duties. Specifically, the agreement states:

> "In cases where the right to exercise jurisdiction is concurrent, the following rules shall apply: (a) The military authorities of the United States shall have the primary right to exercise jurisdiction over members of the United States armed forces or civilian component, and their dependents, in relation to: […] (ii) offenses arising out of any act or omission done in the performance of official duty." [35]

Subsequently, following due process proceedings administered under the auspices of the US military legal system, both individuals implicated were exonerated of charges related to negligent homicide. While proponents from the American camp contend that the proceedings adhered to principles of equitable due process, a substantial segment of the South Korean populace expressed profound discontentment with the judicial outcome. Many perceived the trial as marred by inherent bias and demanded redress for the grievous loss suffered by the victims and their families. Consequently, amid escalating public outcry, grassroots activist movements emerged, advocating for reforms to endow the South Korean judicial apparatus with enhanced legal authority relative to matters pertaining to US military-affiliated cases. This mobilization signifies a broader societal sentiment aimed at rectifying perceived imbalances in the legal

[35] United States Department of State. Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea concerning the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea. 1966. https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Contracting/Contractor%20Links%20Sept%2015/US-ROK%20SOFA_1966-67.pdf

jurisdictional framework, substantiating the enduring quest for justice and accountability within the affected communities.[36]

Amidst one of the numerous peaks of anti-American sentiment in Korean history, the judicial ruling pertaining to the incident under discussion emerged as a significant catalyst, exacerbating pre-existing distrust in the military capabilities of the United States, and questioning the mandate of their continued presence. The ensuing wave of anti-US military demonstrations, epitomized by the widely publicized candlelight vigils, permeated the national consciousness, drawing participants from various strata of society, ranging from students to the elderly. Noteworthy is the remarkable scale of participation, with documented figures indicating a turnout of over one million individuals during the summer and autumn of 2002.[37] The demographic composition of these protests during the early phases of the movement diverged from the typical Korean protest landscape, characterized by a predominance of youthful demonstrators in the teenage to college-aged bracket. Subsequent stages witnessed a gradual shift towards greater involvement from labor unions.[38]

These earlier vigils, despite their solemn undertones, occasionally assumed a spirited character, punctuated by communal singing and dancing, emblematic of the grassroots

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[36] BBC News. "US Soldiers Charged for Korean Deaths." *BBC News*, BBC, 5 July 2002, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2097137.stm.

[37] The Korea Herald. "Deja Vu? Candlelight Vigils in 2002 and Present." *The Korea Herald*, 3 Apr. 2010, m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20080613000005.

[38] Hwang, Injeong, and Charmaine N. Willis. "Protest by Candlelight: A Comparative Analysis of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea, 2002-2017." *Research Gate*, Aug. 2020, www.researchgate.net/publication/327209121_Protest_by_Candlelight_A_Comparative_Analysis_of_Candlelight_Vigils_in_South_Korea_2002-2017.

organizing efforts facilitated through online platforms by ordinary citizens. This departure from the violent demonstrations of Korea's historical milieu accentuates a novel mode of civic engagement and expression. The ambiance of camaraderie and national solidarity engendered by the 2002 FIFA World Cup played a noteworthy role in fostering an environment conducive to such unprecedented levels of civic mobilization. The euphoria stemming from South Korea's historic advancement to the World Cup semifinals infused the populace with heightened emotions, which, in tandem with the prevailing anti-American sentiments, likely galvanized the populace to express their grievances against the US military presence.[39] The co-hosting of the World Cup with Japan, a nation with entrenched historical rivalries, further amplified nationalist fervor, thereby contributing to the impassioned nationalistic reactions observed during this period. The intersection of these events accentuates the interaction between sporting spectacles, nationalist sentiment, and socio-political mobilization within the Korean context.[40]

The potency of these vigils reverberated even within the realm of political discourse, with media outlets attributing a tangible influence of the protests' pervasiveness to the outcome of the ROK presidential election in the same year.[41] This unexpected electoral triumph witnessed the ascent of the liberal candidate for the Millennium Democratic Party, Roh Moo Hyun, over his primary political adversary, Lee Hoi Chang of the conservative Grand National Party. Scholarly analysis often attributes Roh's victory to a confluence of factors, especially considering the

[39] Kang, Jiyeon. "Corporeal Memory and the Making of a Post-Ideological Social Movement: Remembering the 2002 South Korean Candlelight Vigils." *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2012, pp. 329–350, https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2012.0014.

[40] Sasada, Hironori. "Youth and Nationalism in Japan." *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 2, summer 2006, pp. 120, https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2006.0044.

[41] The Korea Herald. "Deja Vu? Candlelight Vigils in 2002 and Present." *The Korea Herald*, 3 Apr. 2010, m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20080613000005.

prevailing anti-American sentiment, robust youth mobilization, and the burgeoning influence of online campaign networks.[42] Central to Roh's electoral platform was his avowed commitment to initiating a gradual disengagement from inequitable ties with the United States, coupled with a pledge to address internal issues plaguing the Korean peninsula. This resonated strongly with an electorate increasingly disenchanted with the status quo and yearning for a shift towards a more self-reliant and assertive foreign policy stance.[43]

Despite Roh's initial lackluster performance in opinion polls, an observable leftward shift in public sentiment, inflamed by mounting anti-American sentiments, gradually bolstered his electoral prospects. However, scholarly discourse remains divided regarding the precise extent to which the candlelight movements directly influenced the electoral outcome. Given the reserved nature of both candidates to openly engage with the rising anti-American sentiment, the impact of the vigils on the election remains a subject of conjecture, with some scholars positing it as a secondary or ancillary factor within the broader electoral formulation.[44]

Nevertheless, the pervasive anti-American sentiment catalyzed a progressive surge across South Korea, profoundly shaping public perceptions of the United States military presence. The emergence of such far-reaching distrust established a seismic shift in the geopolitical

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[42] Lee, Hong Yung. "South Korea in 2002: Multiple Political Dramas." *Asian Survey*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2003, pp. 75, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.1.64.

[43] Bong, Youngshik, and Katharine H.S. Moon. "Rethinking Young Anti-Americanism in South Korea." *The Anti-American Century*, edited by Ivan Krastev and Alan McPherson, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2007, pp. 77–107.

[44] Lee, Hyun-Woo. "Issues and Campaign Strategies in the 2002 Presidential Election." *AccessOn*, 2003, accesson.kr/kj/assets/pdf/8004/journal-43-2-146.pdf.

consciousness of the Korean populace, wherein skepticism towards American military intentions swelled to unprecedented levels. This prompts a critical inquiry into the underlying factors that triggered the explosive proliferation of anti-American sentiment, which, in turn, galvanized year-long protests and exerted a visible influence on political dynamics in South Korea during the beginning years of the 21st century.

II) Anti-Americanism in the Late 20th Century

1. History of American Complicity to Democratic Suppression in South Korea

Skepticism towards the intentions and actions of the United States military in South Korea finds its roots in a convoluted historical narrative marked by a succession of geopolitical maneuvers and interventions. The metaphorical characterization of Korea as a 'shrimp among whales,' emblematic of its precarious geopolitical positioning between regional powerhouses, punctuates the enduring vulnerability and susceptibility to external influence that has defined Korea's past trajectory. Throughout various epochs, Korea has grappled with the repercussions of external interventions, with the United States assuming a prominent, albeit contentious, role in shaping the peninsula's destiny.[45]

From the outset, the United States' engagement with Korea has been fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity, epitomized by instances of tactical passivity and practicality. A memorable illustration of this characterization is the annexation of Korea to Japan, a pivotal juncture in Korean history that unfolded against the backdrop of expanding US imperial

[45] Park, Sungtae Jacky. "Korea: A Shrimp Among Whales." *The Korean Pivot and the Return of Great Power Politics in Northeast Asia*, Atlantic Council, 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03637.5.

ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. President Theodore Roosevelt's acquiescence to Japan's annexation of Korea, in exchange for Japan's acknowledgement of American control over the Philippines under the Taft-Katsura Agreement, symbolized a strategic measure that prioritized American interests over Korean sovereignty.[46]

Subsequent developments, including the division of Korea following the Korean War, engendered a complex interlocking of gratitude and resentment towards the United States among South Koreans. While US military intervention during the Korean War was recognized as a barricade against communist encroachment from the North, lingering suspicions persisted regarding America's long-term intentions and its judged complicity in perpetuating Korea's geopolitical subjugation. The enduring presence of US military forces on Korean soil, ostensibly aimed at ensuring regional stability, was viewed by some as a continuation of the legacy of external domination, echoing the era of Japanese annexation.[47]

Moreover, the United States' selective commitment to democratic principles, juxtaposed against its tacit endorsement of authoritarian regimes in South Korea, further fueled disillusionment and distrust among the Korean populace. Instances of military coups and the subsequent entrenchment of repressive dictatorships under leaders such as Chun Doo Hwan reiterated the apparent incongruity between America's professed values and its pragmatic geopolitical calculations. The United States' perceived inaction in the face of egregious human

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[46] Nahm, Andrew C. "U.S. Policy and the Japanese Annexation of Korea," in *U.S.-Korean Relations 1882-1982*, edited by Tae-Hwan Kwak, John Chay, Soon Sung Cho, and Shannon McCune, Kyungnam University Press, Seoul, 1982, pp. 34-53.

[47] Park, Tae Gyun. "The Beginning of US-Korea Relations." *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South Korea-United States Relations, 1945-1980,* The Academy of Korean Studies Press, Seongnam, 2012, pp. 31–62.

rights violations and state-sponsored repression during these periods of political upheaval engendered profound indignation towards American military presence and influence. Further, the 1980's set the stage for 2000's anti-Americanism due to the United States assumed role of suppression in the Gwangju Uprising and subsequent hinderance to the Minjung movement.[48]

The confluence of these historical grievances and contemporary geopolitical realities has hastened widespread calls for the revision and repeal of the US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement. This sentiment reflects a broader quest for accountability and justice, rooted in the collective memory of past injustices and betrayals. The lingering specter of unresolved grievances, coupled with the demands of contemporary geopolitics, stresses the enduring salience of past narratives in shaping perceptions of the United States military presence in South Korea.

2. Asian Financial Crisis Impact

The enduring presence of anti-American sentiment in South Korea during the early 21st century can be ascribed not only to historical grievances stemming from political and military interventions but also to deep-seated economic factors that have significantly influenced the nation's development trajectory. The Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s left a profound and lasting imprint on the collective consciousness of the Korean populace, marking a pivotal moment in the country's economic and social history. The crisis induced a sharp depreciation in the value of the Korean won and the collapse of major conglomerates, known as chaebols, which had been pillars of the national economy. This economic upheaval led to a severe contraction of

[48] Lee, Samsung. "Kwangju and America in Perspective." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1988, pp. 69–121, https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.1988.a920800.

approximately 20% in the national GDP and caused widespread social disruption. The previously dominant model of state-led development and chaebol-centric growth was revealed to have significant vulnerabilities, including over-leveraging and insufficient regulatory oversight, which were exacerbated by global economic shifts.[49]

Amidst this financial turmoil, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in to provide critical financial assistance. However, the conditions attached to this aid necessitated sweeping reforms aimed at transitioning the economy from a state-controlled to a market-oriented model. These reforms included rigorous market deregulation, extensive privatization of state-owned enterprises, and wide-ranging liberalization of trade policies. While such measures were deemed necessary for stabilizing the economy and preventing future crises, they also sparked considerable controversy and resistance within South Korea.[50]

A segment of the population perceived these IMF-mandated changes as a direct imposition of American-style neoliberal economic policies. This perception was fueled by the significant role of the United States in the IMF and the alignment of the prescribed reforms with US economic interests globally. To these critics, the reforms represented not just a rescue package but a form of economic subjugation that benefited foreign corporations and investors at the expense of Korean sovereignty and economic independence. Although the majority of South Koreans acknowledged the necessity of the IMF's intervention for economic recovery and the

[49] Lee, Keun S. "Financial Crisis in Korea and IMF: Analysis and Perspectives." *Hofstra University,* The Merrill Lynch Center for the Study of International Financial Services and Markets, 1998, www.hofstra.edu/pdf/biz_mlc_lee1.pdf.

[50] Mitchell, Derek J., editor. *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004, pp. 22, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/0406mitchell.pdf.

establishment of a more robust and flexible economic framework, there remained a vocal minority who viewed these policies as emblematic of American hegemony. This group attributed the loss of national economic control and the erosion of traditional industries to US interference, which they argued compromised Korea's autonomy and dignity.[51]

Furthermore, the imposition of these economic policies during a period of national vulnerability deepened feelings of humiliation and indignation. This was not merely an economic crisis; it was also a crisis of national identity and pride. The situation was seen by some as an exploitation of Korea's misfortune, which they equated with a broader pattern of American interference in Korean affairs. [52] In conclusion, the economic shocks of the late 1990s and the ensuing IMF bailout acted as a catalyst for rekindling anti-American sentiment in South Korea. This period highlighted the delicate equilibrium between external assistance and national sovereignty and has left a significant mark on how South Korea navigates its foreign relations and economic policies in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. The Yoon Geumi Case and the Restructuring of SOFA Protest Groups

Referring to the pronounced anti-American sentiment of the late 20th century outlined earlier, we can now examine the concurrent emergence of SOFA-related issues within this same period. SOFA movements entering the 2000s were propelled by the momentum of protests that had simmered since the early 1990s, notably ignited by the tragic case of Yoon Geumi in 1992.

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Robertson, Jeffrey S. "Anti-Americanism in South Korea and the Future of the U.S. Presence." *Journal of International and Area Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, pp. 90–91, https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/96383/1/5.Anti-Americanism-in-South-Korea-and-the-Future-of-the-U.S.-Presence-Jeffrey-S.-Robertson.pdf.

On October 28, 1992, in a Dongducheon camp town, Private Kenneth Lee Markle III perpetrated a heinous act, brutally sexually assaulting and murdering Yoon Geumi with a coke bottle. Initially sentenced to life in prison, Markle saw his sentence later reduced to 15 years due to the compensation provided by the US government to Yoon's family the following year, totaling 71 million won. However, Markle was granted parole approximately one year before completing his sentence, subsequently returning to the United States in 2006. [53]

The media coverage surrounding Yoon Geumi's murder immediately spurred civil groups to call for a revision of the Status of Forces Agreement, particularly highlighting concerns over the unfair jurisdictional procedures that shielded US military personnel from the full extent of the Korean judicial process. By the mid-1990s, the formation of broad coalitions emerged, aiming not only to address SOFA concerns but also to tackle the broader spectrum of grievances pertaining to the US military presence. This transition intensified the escalating strength of the SOFA protest movement, demonstrating a marked departure from earlier, smaller-scale attempts to advocate for governmental reforms.[54]

By 1999, even President Kim Dae Jung publicly committed to revising the SOFA, signaling a governmental acknowledgment of the need for a more equitable relationship between the United States and South Korea. Concurrently, shifts in the South Korean political landscape facilitated the establishment of the People's Action for Reform of the Unjust SOFA (PAR-SOFA), which served as a conglomerate of multiple smaller NGOs and civil groups. This

[53] 고나무. "윤금이 살해한 미군 범죄자는 지금 어디에." *한겨레21*, 11 Nov. 2011, h21.hani.co.kr/arti/special/special_general/30782.html.

[54] Yeo, Andrew. "Anti-Base Movements in South Korea: Comparative Perspective on the Asia-Pacific." *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 23 June 2010, fpif.org/anti-base_movements_in_south_korea/.

inclusive coalition continued to gain prominence throughout the subsequent decade, symbolic of the enduring commitment to effecting substantive change in the US-South Korea alliance dynamics.[55]

III) Anti-Americanism in the Early 2000's

In exploring the socio-political milieu of South Korea during the early 2000s, it is essential to dissect the various factors that gave rise to the expanding anti-American sentiment and its intersection with the quest for reforming the Status of Forces Agreement. This period was characterized by a confluence of internal and external forces that galvanized a reevaluation of South Korea's strategic alliances, fostering an environment ripe for protests and political activism. At the outset of the new millennium, South Korea harbored aspirations for rejuvenating its regional relationships, particularly with neighboring East Asian nations. However, this era did not signal the dawn of a strengthened alliance with the United States. Instead, it witnessed a surge in democratic movements and initiatives aimed at redefining South Korea's stance towards both North Korea and the United States. The pursuit of renewed engagement with North Korea, alongside efforts to recalibrate the terms of alliance with the United States, set the stage for a seismic shift in South Korea's foreign policy outlook. This departure from traditional alignments reflected a broader discontent with the prevailing global order and a growing inclination towards asserting South Korea's autonomy and agency on the international stage.[56]

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Robertson, Jeffrey S. "Anti-Americanism in South Korea and the Future of the U.S. Presence." *Journal of International and Area Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, pp. 93–95, https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/96383/1/5.Anti-Americanism-in-South-Korea-and-the-Future-of-the-U.S.-Presence-Jeffrey-S.-Robertson.pdf.

Central to comprehending this paradigm shift is the interplay of internal and external factors that shaped South Korean discontent. Domestically, the growing anti-American sentiment served as a stimulant for protests and activism, fueled by historical grievances, economic anxieties, and perceptions of American hegemony. Externally, a series of conservative presidencies in the United States strained relations with Seoul, exacerbating tensions due to divergent foreign policy priorities and approaches.[57] Moreover, the absence of perceived external threats, such as those posed by China at a later time, mitigated the urgency for on-site protectionary measures, further accentuating South Korea's focus on reassessing its strategic alignments and redefining its position within the East Asian geopolitical landscape.

In essence, the early 2000s marked a critical intersection for South Korea, characterized by a recalibration of its strategic priorities and a reevaluation of its relationships with key allies. By delving into the underlying drivers of discontent and the interaction of domestic and international factors, we gain deeper insights into the genesis and evolution of anti-American sentiment, as well as its ramifications for SOFA reform efforts during this transformative period in South Korean history.

1. USFK Accident at Kooni Firing Range in Maehyangri

At the domestic level in South Korea, the Maehyangri incident on May 8, 2000, marked a significant moment in SOFA discourse when six bombs were inadvertently dropped prematurely by the United States Forces Korea (USFK) due to an aircraft malfunction. This event triggered a resurgence of anti-base movements, following a period of relative calm after the Yoon Geumi case. Although there were no casualties, the event significantly called attention to the inherent

[57] Ibid.

risks associated with hosting foreign military bases on domestic soil. As a result of the accident, over 100 homes incurred damage and 13 residents sustained injuries. However, an investigative team quickly dismissed the damage claimed by the residents. This incident not only reignited longstanding concerns by the locals over base relocation but also fueled a renewed advocacy for substantive reforms to the Status of Forces Agreement for an environmental protection provision.[58]

The ramifications of the US military presence at the Kooni Firing Range, however, extended far beyond the isolated bombing incident. The villagers of Maehyangri, residing in close proximity to the range, reported enduring a plethora of adverse effects due to the continuous military activities. Among these were elevated levels of hearing loss and disrupted sleep patterns, conditions likely exacerbated by the frequent and intense noise pollution. The local community also documented a range of debilitating mental and physical health conditions, abnormal births, and the presence of lead in the bloodstream, painting a grim picture of the human cost of military readiness. Moreover, the economic impact on the village was profound. The routine military training exercises conducted during weekdays severely restricted local fishing activities, a critical source of livelihood for the community. Similarly, the livestock industry suffered as the incessant noise stressed the animals, significantly reducing the

[58] Kawato, Yuko. "Response to Protests in South Korea, 2000–2007." *Protests Against U.S. Military Base Policy in Asia: Persuasion and Its Limits*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2015, pp. 109–110.

profitability of farming by affecting the production of milk and eggs and stunting the healthy growth of livestock.[59]

In response to these compounded incidents, residents of Maehyangri, supported by various civic groups including the People's Alliance for Reform of the Status of Forces Agreement (PAR-SOFA), initiated vigorous protests. Their most successful tactic was the occupation of the Kooni Firing Range, effectively halting all military activities in the area. This strategic expansion of the protest base to include not only residents but also broader civic groups opposed to the US military presence enabled the movement to amplify its voice and extend its influence.[60]

The concerted efforts of this diverse coalition of protestors culminated in tangible change. The movement successfully advocated for the closure of the Kooni Firing Range in 2004, with the subsequent relocation of the base occurring in 2005. This outcome not only marked a significant victory for the local community and its supporters but also highlighted the potential of organized, sustained civil advocacy in influencing military policies and promoting greater respect for the rights and well-being of local populations affected by foreign military operations. This incident remains a vital example of the challenges inherent in hosting foreign military bases, reflecting broader themes of sovereignty, local autonomy, and the need for harmony between national security and community rights.[61]

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[59] PSPD. "Maehyang-Ri: From a Firing Range to a Test Ground for Human Rights and International Justice." 참여연대, 31 Oct. 2000, www.peoplepower21.org/english/37772.

[60] Yeo, Andrew. "Anti-Base Movements in South Korea: Comparative Perspective on the Asia-Pacific." *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 23 June 2010, fpif.org/anti-base_movements_in_south_korea/.

[61] Ibid.

2. Sunshine with North Korea

Transitioning from these domestic issues and local impacts of foreign military presence, it is crucial to consider the geopolitical strategies that South Korea pursued during the same period. Following the introduction of the Sunshine Policy by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung in 1998, a renewed sense of hope for inter-Korean reconciliation emerged, marking a significant shift in the peninsula's diplomatic landscape. The Sunshine Policy, characterized by principles of restraint from armed provocation, avoidance of attempts at absorption, and promotion of reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea, aimed to foster a more unified Korea. During the initial optimisms of its active phase, measures such as inter-Korean summits, substantial financial aid, and restricted tourism ventures were implemented to facilitate rapprochement between the two Koreas. [62]

In parallel, efforts were made by the United States, particularly under President Clinton's administration, to initiate dialogue with North Korea. Under Clinton, the US's main goals with North Korea were to reduce the threats posed by nuclear weapons and its missiles program to eventually normalize talks with Pyongyang. Although President Kim Young Sam's administration had exhibited high levels of mistrust towards North Korea,[63] the advent of Kim Dae Jung's presidency welcomed increased talks between Washington and Pyongyang. These tentative steps towards engagement mirrored South Korea's diplomatic overtures, albeit with

[62] "North Korea Policy of the Kim Dae Jung Government," Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea.

[63] "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, President William J. Clinton and South Korea President Kim Young Sam, in Re North Korea, August 16, 1994." *National Security Archive*, 2019, nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20412-national-security-archive-doc-06-memorandum.

varying degrees of success. The culmination of these efforts was the historic inter-Korean summit held from June 13-15, 2000, which resulted in a series of high-profile meetings between North Korea and South Korea. Discussions during these meetings included deliberations on the US military presence in South Korea, with North Korea expressing hopes for its withdrawal. This summit also triggered a series of meetings between North Korea and its former adversaries. For example, Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright became the highest-ranking US official to enter Pyongyang and meet with Kim Jong Il to discuss security issues regarding the DPRK's missile programs.[64]

However, as time progressed, it became evident that these meetings served as yet another stratagem by North Korea to leverage international aid and alleviate economic sanctions without fulfilling its commitments. Despite gestures of goodwill and concessions made by South Korea and other participating nations, North Korea remained recalcitrant and continued to engage in provocations, including the positioning of military forces and weapons near the border.[65] Amidst these diplomatic maneuvers, the political landscape shifted with the inauguration of President George W. Bush in 2001. President Bush's administration adopted a more confrontational stance towards North Korea, viewing it as a significant political adversary. This shift was underscored by President Bush's characterization of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" in 2002, further

[64] Paik, Haksoon. "Assessment of the Sunshine Policy: A Korean Perspective." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 15, https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2002.0012.
[65] Kim, Samuel S. "North Korea in 2000: Surviving through High Hopes of Summit Diplomacy." *Asian Survey*, vol. 41, no. 1, Jan. 2001, pp. 12–29, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2001.41.1.12.

exacerbating tensions between the two nations and signaling a departure from previous engagement-oriented approaches.[66]

Furthermore, public opinion polls conducted in February 2002, shortly after the "axis of evil" statement, revealed a prominent decline in favorability towards the United States among South Koreans. Only 33.7% of South Koreans expressed a positive view of the United States, with a significant generational disparity. Specifically, only 23.1% of respondents in their twenties and 21.2% in their thirties held a positive view, compared to 40.9% of respondents in their forties and 50% of those in their fifties and older.[67] This decline in favorability towards the United States, coupled with the US's unwillingness to adapt to South Korea's relations with North Korea, further complicated efforts to offset strategic realignment with North Korea.

Consequently, as South Koreans began to perceive North Koreans with reduced hostilities, US hardline policy drove a wedge between South Korea and America. Additionally, South Korean public perception of North Korea as unlikely to strike, given its weakened state due to prolonged famine, and the lack of perceived nuclear threat, led to a willingness to adopt a more pacifist stance towards its northern neighbor. These factors contributed to the strained

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[66] "George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 20, 2002." *National Security Archive*, 2002, nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28048-document-08-george-w-bush-state-union-address-january-20-2002.

[67] Hong, Youngnim. "Yoron chosa: Miguk hogamdo" [Opinion Poll: Koreans' Image of the United States] Chosun Ilbo, March 4, 2002, pp. 7.

partnership between the US and South Korea, exacerbating tensions and complicating efforts towards regional stability and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.[68]

However, amidst these strained relations, developments occurred, aiming to address public concerns and mitigate criticism of the United States. One notable instance was the 2001 revision of the US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement, which increased the ROK's ability to prosecute American soldiers under Korean law. This revision attempted to defuse public criticism of the United States by demonstrating a commitment to accountability and justice within the US military presence in South Korea. By granting South Korea greater jurisdiction over legal matters involving American soldiers, the revised SOFA sought to address longstanding grievances and enhance the perception of fairness and sovereignty in the US-South Korea relationship.[69]

Unfortunately, the 2002 Yangju highway incident exposed remaining holes in true SOFA effectiveness for satisfying South Korean public sentiment. Attempts at diffusing tension didn't last as seen in 2003 when President Roh publicly criticized operations control of military forces by the US as a threat to South Korean sovereignty. As a fast-growing nation, he believed that South Korea deserved more respect as a power partner rather than an underling.[70]

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[68] Lee, Sook-Jong. "Allying with the United States: Changing South Korean Attitudes." *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 2005, pp. 95–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270509464075.

[69] Boose, Donald W. "Introduction: The Alliance Challenged." *Recalibrating the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2003, pp. 1–15, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/100616/recalibrating_us_republic_full.pdf.

[70] Nordin, Johannes. "Taking Back Control: South Korea and the Politics of OPCON Transfer." *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, Jan. 2020, isdp.eu/publication/taking-back-control-south-korea-and-the-politics-of-opcon-transfer/.

Even during this brief period of increased inter-Korean relations, the general South Korean public still held an apprehensive stance towards their northern neighbors. In a poll conducted in September 2003 by the Joongang Ilbo and CSIS, 82.8% of Korean participants agreed that the US should continue to be stationed within South Korea. Of those who concurred, 55.4% cited the possibility of a North Korean invasion as the most compelling reason for maintaining US presence.[71] These statistics emphasize the prevailing skepticism among the South Korean populace regarding the efficacy of peaceful unification efforts. Despite government efforts to promote reconciliation, the public's reservations persisted, recognizing the indispensable role of improved DPRK relations with the US and Japan in realizing reunification aspirations. Additionally, amid strained relations between the US and South Korea, lingering distrust towards North Korea persisted, with a segment of the public advocating for a unified Korea under South Korean control as being in the best interest of all Koreans, including those from the North.[72]

This skepticism and divergence in public opinion set the stage for further complications in the US-South Korea relationship. As tensions escalated in the international arena, particularly with the onset of the Iraq War, the deployment of US Forces Korea troops to the Middle East became a contentious issue. Despite facing objections from a substantial segment of the South Korean public and legislators, the deployment of USFK troops proceeded, exacerbating tensions between the two allied nations amid differing domestic opinions.

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[71] Mitchell, Derek J., editor. *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004, pp. 127, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/0406mitchell.pdf.
[72] Ibid.

3. The War on Terror

In the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, which resulted in the loss of nearly 3,000 lives, the United States underwent a significant shift in its national security strategy. With a renewed focus on combating threats from states harboring extremist Islamic ideologies perceived as hostile to American interests, attention was directed towards regions such as the Middle East, relegating the Korean peninsula issue to a secondary position. This realignment had substantial implications for both North and South Korea. North Korea found its prospects for receiving international aid reduced as the US channeled more resources into the Middle East, particularly Afghanistan. Simultaneously, South Korea's efforts to enhance inter-Korean relations via open dialogue with regional actors were further complicated. Japan's strong alignment with US hardline strategies in Asia dampened any immediate hopes for warming relations between the US and North Korea as well as between Japan and North Korea, significantly setting back South Korea's diplomatic aspirations.[73]

Soon after its conception, political analysts envisioned an expansive trajectory for the War on Terror, extending far beyond the confines of Afghanistan to encompass nations suspected of harboring clandestine arsenals of weapons of mass destruction, spanning from biological and chemical agents to nuclear capabilities. This prognostication accented the likelihood of mounting pressure on allied nations to align with US-led military endeavors, thereby engendering potential fissures in diplomatic relations and coalition dynamics. Although initial expressions of solidarity with the United States in its War on Terror may have been forthcoming, the exigencies of

[73] Oh, Kongdan. "9/11 Terrorism: What It Means for the US and Korea." *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2001, pp. 59–78, https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8880/4/0001477201.pdf.

resource allocation and the vagaries of geopolitical temperament rendered such alliances inherently fragile and subject to rapid erosion. [74]

In South Korea, the US-led War on Terror was met with a mixture of sympathy for the United States and apprehension regarding perceived imperialistic tendencies. Many observers construed America's response as a manifestation of nationalist fervor underpinned by aspirations for hegemonic control over Islamic nations through coercive means. This narrative was reinforced by human rights organizations that castigated US actions as veiled pursuits of strategic oil interests under the guise of necessity. The Human Rights Commission, in particular, censured the United States for embarking on military campaigns ostensibly premised on orders of security, when in reality, they appeared motivated by resource-driven ambitions. Against the backdrop of mounting tensions in the Middle East, the presence of US military forces in the region heightened anxieties within South Korea, evoking concerns over potential reprisals for diverging from American policy stances. South Korea feared that by acting as an onlooker to the war waging on in Iraq, they would have no legitimacy in their claims against a possible US-led invasion in North Korea.[75]

The decision to redeploy a significant portion of US Forces Korea to Iraq raised questions about the extent of America's commitment to South Korean security. While fearing the abandonment of up to 1/3 of US military forces on the Korean peninsula as a security measure against North Korea, this concern was counteracted with the equally problematic unease of

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Lee, Gerald Geunwook. "South Korea's Faustian Attitude: The Republic of Korea's Decision to Send Troops to Iraq Revisited." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 481–493, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570600869523.

entrapment by the inequalities of US SOFA policy.[76] President Roh Moo Hyun's approval to dispatch troops to Iraq in 2003 encountered widespread opposition from the public and lawmakers, reflecting skepticism about the motives behind the US military operation. In fact, only around 25% supported the decision with only 7% believing the reported motives of the US of trying to target Iraq's WMD program. Despite economic concerns from ongoing recessions and general public disapproval, South Korea eventually acquiesced to US requests for combat troops, driven by national interests and a desire to strengthen the US-ROK alliance.[77]

However, the abduction and subsequent execution of a Korean contractor by an extremist Islamic faction in May 2004 served as a stark and sobering testament to the perils entailed by South Korea's entanglement in the Iraq War. Amidst internal political upheaval, including the ousting of Roh Moo-Hyun from office, and palpable public discontent, South Korea grappled with the multifaceted intricacies of reconciling divergent domestic sentiments with international obligations. Nonetheless, against this turbulent setting, South Korea ultimately acceded to mounting external pressures and dispatched combat contingents to Iraq in September 2004, thus emblemizing the web of diplomatic considerations and pragmatic obligations shaping its foreign policy framework.[78]

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[76] Lee, Sook-Jong. "Allying with the United States: Changing South Korean Attitudes." *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 2005, pp. 81–104, https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270509464075.

[77] Lee, Gerald Geunwook. "South Korea's Faustian Attitude: The Republic of Korea's Decision to Send Troops to Iraq Revisited." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 481–493, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570600869523.

[78] Kim, Steven. "Republic of Korea: Meeting the Challenge of Transnational Threats in the Twenty-First Century." *Issues for Engagement: Asian Perspectives on Transnational Security Challenges*, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2010, pp. 104–116.

Interestingly, during discussions concerning the redeployment of the USFK and the potential reduction of troop numbers in South Korea, there was no extreme surge in anti-American sentiment prompting calls for a reevaluation of the Status of Forces Agreement.[79] The lack of large-scale protests demanding SOFA reform during the Korean deployment to Iraq can be attributed to multiple factors, predominantly influenced by the nature of the conflict and the strategic decisions made by South Korean leadership. Specifically, it is plausible to suggest that President Roh Moo Hyun's unilateral decision to accede to American requests for troop deployment—despite considerable opposition from both policymakers and public sentiment—redirected public focus from foreign affairs to domestic democratic processes. Additionally, President Roh's directive to limit negative media coverage regarding the deployment of South Korean troops to Iraq curtailed the dissemination of information that might have further inflamed public discontent with the US-ROK military alliance. Although 6,000 protestors gathered in front of the US embassy in Seoul to protest around the time of the beheading of South Korean national, Kim Soon-il, these figures are modest when compared to the estimated 1 million participants in SOFA protests following the 2002 Yangju highway incident. The suppression of protests related to the Iraq War by police forces also played a role in discouraging gatherings that might have escalated into violence.[80]

Furthermore, the prevailing narrative portraying South Korea as anti-American and an ungrateful ally may have instilled fear among the public regarding the US commitment to protect

[79] Bong, Youngshik, and Katharine H.S. Moon. "Rethinking Young Anti-Americanism in South Korea." *The Anti-American Century*, edited by Ivan Krastev and Alan McPherson, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2007, pp. 77–107.

[80] Agence France Presse. "Anti-War Protesters Rally in Seoul." *Al Jazeera*, 15 Aug. 2004, www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/8/15/anti-war-protesters-rally-in-seoul.

the Korean peninsula, particularly amidst George W. Bush's characterization of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil." Consequently, concerns over insufficient security during a time of war likely outweighed considerations of sovereignty and rights violations, compelling South Koreans to prioritize protection over calls for SOFA reform. The decision to support non-combat troops initially, followed by the eventual deployment of combat troops, reflected a practical approach driven by national interest rather than ideological alignment with US policies.[81]

4. Community Reaction to Military Base Expansion in Pyeongtaek

As previously noted, domestic tensions in South Korea were intensified by the geopolitical anxieties triggered by the onset of the Iraq War. For example, a significant domestic issue arose in 2004 when then-President Roh Moo Hyun proposed a substantial expansion of Camp Humphreys, increasing its size threefold. This expansion necessitated the acquisition and demolition of adjacent lands, which had profound implications for the local community. Particularly impacted were the elderly population and local rice farmers, who were confronted with the prospect of having to dismantle their established livelihoods and relocate, thus threatening the continuity and stability of their traditional way of life. The proposed expansion also stoked fears regarding the transformation of Pyeongtaek into a typical military "camp town." There was growing concern among local residents that the expansion would exacerbate safety issues, as US military towns in South Korea had historically been associated with a range of illicit activities, including prostitution and gambling. Such activities not only undermine public

[81] Moon, Katherine H.S. “South Korea-US Relations.” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2004, pp. 59, /https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704478?seq=1.

safety but also detract from the community's social fabric, contributing to a degradation of the area's reputation.[82]

In response to the proposed expansion of Camp Humphreys, a series of organized protests erupted, some of which escalated into violent confrontations. Protesters occupied abandoned homes within the vicinity of the camp, creating a stark visual and physical opposition to the ongoing government-sanctioned demolitions. This juxtaposition of civilian resistance and governmental enforcement not only highlighted the social tensions but also attracted media coverage that tended to portray the protests in a negative light. Such coverage played a significant role in shaping public perception, and ultimately dampening nationwide support for the protesters' cause. From 2003 to 2010, public opinion in Pyeongtaek demonstrated a noticeable shift: support for the base expansion grew from 37.8% to 49.5%. Concurrently, opposition significantly decreased from 53% to 24.3%, with the remainder of the population remaining ambivalent.[83] This shift in public sentiment was further compounded by the stance of Pyeongtaek's conservative mayor, Myeong-ho Song, who not only supported the expansion but also advocated for the Special Act in Support of Pyeongtaek. This legislative initiative was designed to secure additional benefits for residents to offset the disruptive impact of the land development.[84]

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[82] Martin, Bridget. "From Camp Town to International City: Us Military Base Expansion and Local Development in Pyeongtaek, South Korea." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 42, no. 6, Nov. 2018, pp. 967–985, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12698.

[83] 이철형. "주한미군기지 이전 거부감 5 년 새 크게 줄어 중앙정부·평택시·의회·시민단체 신뢰도 낮아." 평택시민신문, 22 Dec. 2010, www.pttimes.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=23052.

[84] Martin, Bridget. "From Camp Town to International City: Us Military Base Expansion and Local Development in Pyeongtaek, South Korea." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 42, no. 6, Nov. 2018, pp. 967–985, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12698.

In an effort to cultivate broader community support, several propaganda campaigns were launched, promising substantial economic benefits from the expansion. These campaigns suggested that transforming Pyeongtaek into a more internationalized city would not only enhance the local economy but also provide residents with new opportunities for wealth creation and skill development, thereby attracting a more globalized demographic. Despite these optimistic projections, dissent continued to simmer, culminating in anti-compensation and development protests. These demonstrations reflected ongoing resistance among segments of the local population who remained wary of the promised benefits and concerned about the long-term social and environmental impacts of the expansion.[85]

The initial wave of protests against the expansion of Camp Humphreys, while potent at its onset, ultimately lacked long-term sustainability. Several factors contributed to this outcome. Firstly, Camp Humphreys was not a new establishment but an already existing military base. Consequently, the proposed expansion did not emerge abruptly but was anticipated, thus it did not ignite the same level of public outrage that might occur when a completely new military installation threatens previously unaffected land. Moreover, the expansion plan for Camp Humphreys was designed to unfold over several years. This extended timeline allowed for the gradual dissipation of activist energy, particularly among external civic groups whose sustained engagement typically requires immediate and pressing causes to galvanize continued public support. As the expansion stretched over time, the urgency and immediate impact perceived by these groups diminished, leading to a waning of their active involvement.[86]

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

In 2006, when the Ministry of National Defense initiated more aggressive measures to expedite the expansion, their tactics included blocking access roads, constructing fences, and notably, filling local irrigation systems with cement, thereby severely impacting local agricultural practices. These actions effectively displaced farmers, pushing them out of their lands, and escalating tensions within the community.[87] Despite these adversities, the conflict reached a resolution when the United States negotiated settlements with the affected landowners. This agreement provided compensation that, while possibly not fully addressing all grievances, led to a cessation of most activist efforts. The remaining activists, acknowledging the decisions and acceptance of the broader community of the settlements, eventually ceased their opposition. Following these developments, Camp Humphreys expanded from its original 1,210 acres to over 3,500 acres. This transformation significantly altered the local landscape and had profound implications on the community and the region. The resolution of the protests through settlements, rather than through policy changes or a cessation of the expansion, reflects the diverse interactions of military expansion, land rights, and local economic impacts. These events highlight the challenges of balancing national security interests with the rights and livelihoods of local communities.[88]

Amidst discontent with the USFK and the Status of Forces Agreement, concerns about military equality and political sovereignty loomed large in the 2000s, emphasizing underlying tensions in the US-South Korea alliance. Moving forward, emerging unfavorable geopolitical

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Yeo, Andrew. "Anti-Base Movements in South Korea: Comparative Perspective on the Asia-Pacific." *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 23 June 2010, fpif.org/anti-base_movements_in_south_korea/.

conditions, particularly with regards to North Korea and China, widely shaped perceptions of the US in South Korea. As new challenges and adversaries continued to enter the global stage, the narrative surrounding US presence and influence in South Korea also underwent further evolution, with implications for bilateral relations and regional stability.[89]

IV) Turning Tide

As the late 2000s unfolded, the geopolitical landscape and US-ROK relations experienced profound transformations. The subsiding anti-American sentiment in South Korea coincided with significant geopolitical challenges, particularly marked by North Korea's 2006 nuclear test. This period was characterized by vital shifts, including the US's acknowledgment of South Korea as a more equal partner, highlighted by the agreement reached at the 2007 Defense Ministers Meeting to transition wartime operational control to South Korea by 2012. [90] Although repeatedly deferred due to the political and economic ramifications for both parties that make the process challenging,[91] this agreement symbolized a move towards a more balanced alliance.

Furthermore, the year 2007 heralded the initiation of the US-ROK Free Trade Agreement, enhancing economic integration and boosting bilateral trade volumes.[92] This

[89] Jang, Ye-ji. "When and Why Did Koreans Go from Anti-American to Pro-US?" *Hankyoreh*, 5 June 2023, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1094678.

[90] The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "The Troubled ROK-U.S. Alliance." *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 21 Jan. 2022, en.asaninst.org/contents/the-troubled-rok-u-s-alliance/.

[91] Chung, Tae-Ik. "The Transfer of Wartime Operational Control: Crisis and Opportunity." *Hyundai Research Institute*, Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 2006, www.hri.co.kr/upload/board/ICNK_FORUM_060728.pdf.

[92] United States Trade Representative. "U.S. - Korea Free Trade Agreement." *United States Trade Representative*, ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/korus-fta#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20and%20the,)%20on%20June%2030%2C%202007.&te

agreement significantly aided South Korea in diversifying its trading partners and reducing its economic dependency on China. The political scene in South Korea saw a substantial shift with the election of conservative President Lee Myung Bak in 2008, ending a decade of progressive governance. This change, alongside the election of Barack Obama in the United States, facilitated a recalibration of past diplomatic grievances and prepared the groundwork for a conservative governance era in South Korea, viewing the US military presence as a strategic asset amidst escalating regional threats.[93]

The termination of the Sunshine Policy marked a crucial moment, revealing it as a decade-long venture filled with unmet promises from North Korea, culminating in strained inter-Korean relations by the late 2000s. With the election of Lee Myung-Bak, South Korea entered an era of more conservative presidential leadership. This period highlighted a growing disparity in opinions, indicating potential for the US to regain favorability. The pre-existing skepticism towards North Korean leadership made it easier for South Korea to rally public support for the US military presence as necessary containment against North Korean unpredictability.[94] This scene of fluctuating inter-Korean relations, compounded by the failure of diplomatic initiatives like the Sunshine Policy and inflamed by incidents such as the civilian deaths at Mount Kumgang, set the stage for a detailed examination in the second half of this paper. The key

xt=U.S.%20goods%20and%20services%20trade,estimated%20%24168.6%20billion%20in%202019. Accessed 4 May 2024.

[93] Amirghahari. "President Obama and President Lee of South Korea Hold a Joint Press Conference." *Obama White House*, National Archives and Records Administration, 13 Oct. 2011, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/10/13/president-obama-and-president-lee-south-korea-hold-joint-press-conference.

[94] Snyder, Scott. "Expanding the US–South Korea Alliance." *The US–South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2012, pp. 1–20.

events to be explored include escalated tensions with North Korea, the unprecedented rise of China, and the comprehensive overhaul of Asian foreign policy by the US. These elements collectively illustrate why South Korea, gaining global recognition, perceives these escalating security risks as threats to its sovereignty, and subsequently, turned away from serious confrontations of SOFA legislation.

1. Crumbling of Inter-Korean Relations

The optimism for improved inter-Korean relations under Kim Dae Jung rapidly deteriorated in the subsequent years of the 2000's. The disillusionment with the Sunshine Policy, which had become a costly endeavor with minimal North Korean concessions, led to renewed strains in relations. North Korea continued to funnel exorbitant amounts of money into the government's WMD program and its military forces. Despite the ongoing Six Party Talks which commenced in 2003, there was little progress to point to any success of nuclear weapons reduction and removal by the North. Instead, intermittent talks seemed only to provide North Korea with further aid without substantial denuclearization.[95]

This period was further marred by hostile acts from North Korea, which collectively heightened tensions and suggested the potential for more severe conflict. In March 2010, a North Korean torpedo sunk South Korean naval ship Cheonan near the shared border, consequently killing 46 sailors aboard. Then in November 2010, South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island served as the site for a North Korean artillery attack resulting in 4 deaths and property damage. These

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[95] Bajoria, Jayshree, and Beina Xu. "The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 Sept. 2013, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program.

incidents, alongside North Korea's second nuclear weapon test in 2009, were perceived internationally as indications of escalating provocations that could potentially lead to a full-scale war.[96]

Following North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, President Park Geun-Hye of South Korea implemented a "conditions-based" approach to the Operational Control (OPCON) transition in 2014. This strategic shift required South Korea to first develop essential military capacities needed to lead combined allied forces and to effectively respond to North Korean nuclear and missile threats. Additionally, a favorable security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the surrounding region was necessary before the transfer of operational control could proceed. This approach not only demonstrated South Korea's ongoing need for US support but also acknowledged the strength and commitment of America's military response. The conditions-based strategy was adopted as a form of reassurance, highlighting South Korea's continued reliance on US support amid the fluctuating security landscape of Northeast Asia.[97]

During the era of the Sunshine Policy, there was a palpable hope within South Korea for an improved relationship with North Korea that could stabilize the peninsula and lay a pathway toward peace. Initially, in the early 2000s, the South Korean public and government sought to enhance relations to facilitate dialogue and develop cooperative measures with the North. However, as the decade progressed into the late 2000s and 2010s, the focus shifted towards

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[96] You, Jong-sung. "The Cheonan Incident and the Declining Freedom of Expression in South Korea." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2015, pp. 195–219, https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2015.0001.

[97] Nordin, Johannes. "Taking Back Control: South Korea and the Politics of OPCON Transfer." *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, Jan. 2020, isdp.eu/publication/taking-back-control-south-korea-and-the-politics-of-opcon-transfer/.

seeking arms reduction and de-escalating tensions, as it became apparent that without significant improvements in US-DPRK relations, substantial changes in inter-Korean stability seemed unlikely.[98] The geopolitical landscape on the Korean Peninsula underwent significant changes during this period, characterized by a reversion to increased hostilities. The public and political sentiment towards North Korea reflected this shift, growing increasingly skeptical about the feasibility of unification. Concerns were raised about the potential economic burdens and resource strains unification could impose on the South, especially as the population became more distant from the memories of the Korean War, reducing the sense of unity between the two Koreas.[99] Later hopes for a thaw in inter-Korean relations, marked by the 2008 anti-US beef protests that led to a temporary rapprochement and partial dismantlement of certain North Korean nuclear facilities, proved ephemeral. By 2009, these sentiments had reversed. Tensions escalated as North Korea resumed its previously dormant nuclear program, highlighting the volatile nature of inter-Korean relations and the difficulties in sustaining diplomatic progress amidst the constantly changing geopolitical environment.[100]

This backdrop also influenced US-ROK relations, as both nations navigated the intricate balance between regional alliances and national sovereignty in a rapidly shifting security landscape. The conservative turn in South Korean presidency in 2008 led to a hardened stance

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[98] Wertz, Daniel. "Inter-Korean Relations." *NCNK*, The National Committee on North Korea, Sept. 2023, www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/inter-korean-relations.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ho, Ming-sho, and Chen-Shuo Hong. "Challenging New Conservative Regimes in South Korea and Taiwan Comparison of the Anti-American Beef Protests." *Asian Survey*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2012, pp. 655, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.4.643.

towards the DPRK, aligning more closely with a more cautious approach to North Korean provocations. As inter-Korean relations oscillated between brief periods of warmth and longer durations of tension, the challenges of achieving a stable and peaceful peninsula became increasingly apparent. This observation emphasized the ongoing need for robust diplomatic strategies and continued vigilance in monitoring the peninsula's security environment, complicating efforts towards peace and stability.[101]

Due to the deterioration of inter-Korean relations, the United States' role as a security provider has enabled its military to reframe its image from an overbearing force to a necessary stabilizer, thereby reinforcing the importance of the Status of Forces Agreement. With a tangible threat mitigated through an agreement previously viewed as unfavorable, public perception began to recognize the benefits of maintaining SOFA, despite its imperfections. Rather than risking the loss of the security alliance with the United States, South Korea's apprehension of abandonment has played a crucial role in moderating large-scale anti-US military and SOFA protests.

2. Pressure from China

The rapid ascent of China as a dominant economic force, observable even during the global financial crisis of 2008, has provoked significant apprehension among neighboring nations such as Japan and South Korea. These countries are particularly worried about the long-term implications of China's burgeoning influence on regional economic autonomy and individualism. Concern within South Korea additionally compounded due to prior identity disputes in the 21st century surrounding the origins of the Goguryeo Kingdom in 2004, in which

[101] Wertz, Daniel. "Inter-Korean Relations." *NCNK*, The National Committee on North Korea, Sept. 2023, www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/inter-korean-relations.

China declared the Goguryo Kingdom to be an important piece of Chinese history and subsequently deleted the kingdom's mention from its Korean history section on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. This instance served as an early indicator of China's assertive posture and strategic nature in the region. These developments amplified the public's view of the need for South Korea to reassess its geopolitical positioning in light of China's growing influence and expansionist tendencies.[102] Further, the evolving regional landscape, characterized by China's rise and increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, has prompted a reevaluation of the SOFA and its implications for South Korea's security and sovereignty.

China's robust response to the 2008 financial crisis and relative success in avoiding a recession[103] allowed for expanding its substantial investments in military modernization and assertive maritime strategy, and further heightened apprehensions among South Koreans. Despite still spending significantly less than the United States on defense, China's military defense budget surged by over 12% in 2013, reflecting its commitment to expanding its military capabilities and establishing its regional dominance.[104] This escalation of military expenditures and assertive behavior raised alarms among South Koreans, with a 2014 study finding 66.4% of

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[102] Gries, Peter Hays. "The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today." *East Asia*, vol. 22, no. 4, Dec. 2005, pp. 3–17, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248138859_The_Koguryo_controversy_national_identity_and_Sino-Korean_relations_today.

[103] Yueh, Linda. "A Stronger China." *Finance and Development*, vol. 47, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 8–11, https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2010/06/pdf/yueh.pdf.

[104] Herb, Jeremy. "Is Obama Pivot to Asia on Hold?" *The Hill*, The Hill, 30 Mar. 2014, thehill.com/policy/defense/202092-is-obama-pivot-to-asia-on-hold/.

participants to perceive China as a growing military threat, especially with regards to territorial disputes in the region.[105]

In addition to tensions over territorial disputes, improper conduct in international waterways and human rights violations further strained relations between South Korea and China. Most importantly, maritime military measures were ramped up in the 2010's by China leading to a series of island disputes with its neighbors in the South China Sea.[106] These incidents, coupled with China's perceived disregard for international norms and regulations, undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of many South Koreans. Public opinion polls revealed a growing apprehension among South Koreans, with an overwhelming majority viewing the United States as a crucial ally for security in the face of escalating tensions with China.[107]

The year 2010 proved to be a watershed moment in Sino-South Korean relations, marked by incidents involving illegal Chinese fishing vessels in South Korean waters. These incidents, which often resulted in confrontations between South Korean authorities and Chinese fishermen, worsened public sentiments against China. For example, on December 18, 2010, 50 Chinese fishing boats illegally catching in South Korean waters were to be detained by a South Korean patrol boat. In an alleged attempt to help other fishermen escape, one collided with the patrol vehicle, resulting in two Chinese deaths. The South Korean government's decision to release three detained Chinese fishermen after China demanded compensation was enacted to avoid

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[105] The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2014." *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 19 Apr. 2014, en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/.

[106] Hwang, Balbina Y. "The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea's Rise." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2017, pp. 81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171474?seq=1.

[107] The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2014." *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 19 Apr. 2014, en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/.

further political escalation. However, this decision only fueled public outrage, with many perceiving it as capitulation to Chinese demands.[108] Consequently, there was a surge in public sentiment favoring closer security ties with the United States as a counterweight to China's growing influence. This case seems to mirror that of earlier SOFA protest against the US, only with China now in the hotseat for thwarting Korean sovereignty over an international case that directly harms them.

Against this backdrop, we must also examine the implications of Pyongyang's relationship with Beijing. China's status as one of North Korea's primary benefactors grants it considerable leverage over the regime in Pyongyang. By providing substantial financial and material support, China effectively bolsters the survival of the North Korean government and maintains a degree of influence over its behavior. This symbiotic relationship between China and North Korea raises concerns among regional actors, particularly in South Korea, about the potential ramifications of China's support for a regime notorious for its provocative actions and nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, China's steadfast backing of North Korea serves to shield the regime from international pressure and sanctions, thereby affording it a degree of impunity in its actions. The prospect of severe punishment or intervention by the international community is mitigated by China's protective stance, ensuring that North Korea remains insulated from external pressures.[109]

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[108] Hwang, Balbina Y. "The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea's Rise." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2017, pp. 71–97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171474?seq=1.

[109] Snyder, Scott. *China's Rise and the Two Koreas*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2009, pp. 137-162.

The nexus between North Korea and China also complicates the security calculus of neighboring states, particularly South Korea. The 2010 Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, which heightened tensions between North and South Korea, prompted a reevaluation of military strategy by the Republic of Korea. In response to these provocations, the South Korean public expressed a consensus on the need to bolster defense capabilities and enhance readiness for potential hostilities. However, such measures were met with disapproval from China, which viewed them as provocative and destabilizing. China's concerns stemmed from the perceived threat of increased hostilities and the potential for conflict to disrupt the economic interdependence of the region. The prospect of heightened tensions and military confrontation between North and South Korea, exacerbated by South Korea's defensive posture, risked undermining the delicate stability of power in East Asia and jeopardizing regional stability.[110]

The security landscape in East Asia presents South Korea with numerous challenges and strategic dilemmas that necessitate careful consideration and deliberation. As South Korea relies partially on the presence of on-the-ground troops for its security measures, it confronts a series of caveats and uncertainties regarding the efficacy and implications of such arrangements. The Korean government, following meticulous cost-benefit analysis, has opted to shoulder more of the burdens associated with US military presence, recognizing the alternative as potentially exposing the peninsula to heightened risks and vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, South Korea's geographical proximity to powerful regional actors, such as China and Japan, exposes it to the risk of being drawn into regional power dynamics. While recent trends have seen South Korea aligning more closely with Japan, bolstered by shared ties

[110] Hwang, Balbina Y. “The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea’s Rise.” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2017, pp. 82–83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171474?seq=1.

with the United States, China's increasing economic and political influence in the region poses significant challenges. Despite China's attempts to leverage its economic clout for political gains, South Korea remains cautious, prioritizing its security alliance with the United States over potential benefits offered by China. The rise of China as a formidable economic and political force has sparked concerns among South Korean citizens regarding the potential coercion tactics employed by China to advance its interests. In this context, the United States serves as a check to traditional Asian giants, offering a source of stability and security amidst regional uncertainties. While realist perspectives caution against overreliance on economic interdependence, neoliberal arguments advocate for leveraging economic ties to maintain stability and prevent hegemonic dominance.[111]

The interplay between economic interdependence and political sovereignty underscores the competing factors of South Korea's strategic thinking. As South Korea manages its alliances and partnerships in a rapidly evolving regional landscape, it must carefully align its security imperatives with the goal to maintain autonomy and sovereignty. Otherwise, it could face a similar fate as Southeast Asian countries facing financial instability that must capitulate as a hedging tactic.[112] Therefore, the dual hierarchy system in Asia helps to prevent total hedging

[111] Snyder, Scott. "Excerpt: China's Rise and the Two Koreas." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, www.cfr.org/excerpt-chinas-rise-and-two-koreas#footnote-marker-4-1.
[112] Shambaugh, David. "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?" *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018, pp. 85–127, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00314.

towards one power, where the US supplies military security and China provides economic safety.[113]

While calls for reform of the Status of Forces Agreement may arise in discussions surrounding the relevance of the US military alliance, South Korea's reactive approach reflects its current inability to independently influence significant changes. South Korea's strategic posture is characterized by reactive measures and realistic considerations, driven by its perceived vulnerabilities and desire to establish itself among the regional power distribution. The leadership of figures like Lee Myung Bak and Park Geun Hye in the 2010's reinforced South Korea's commitment to enhancing global engagement while maintaining robust ties with key allies. As South Korea charts its course in an uncertain geopolitical landscape, strategic flexibility and diplomatic finesse will be paramount in safeguarding its national interests and security.[114]

3. Obama's Pivot to Asia

In response to China's rising influence in the Asia-Pacific region, President Barack Obama initiated a strategic realignment towards the East often referred to as the "Pivot to Asia." This policy strategy aimed to reinforce the United States' presence in Asia, both economically and militarily, as a counterbalance to China's growing power although not necessarily presented in these specific terms. A key component of this pivot was the proposal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade and investment agreement among Asia-Pacific nations committed to

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[113] Ikenberry, G. John. "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia." *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 131, no. 1, 24 Nov. 2015, pp. 9–43, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12430.

[114] Hwang, Balbina Y. "The US Pivot to Asia and South Korea's Rise." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2017, pp. 71–97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171474?seq=1.

adhering to principles of "transparency, intellectual property protection, labor rights, and environmental conservation."[115] Interestingly, China did not participate in the negotiation process for the agreement, as its policies did not align with the stipulated principles. This divergence featured a strategic decision by the US to foster an economic bloc that could uphold and advance US economic and security values in Asia, while carefully guiding relations with China to avoid escalating tensions.[116]

Furthermore, the US bolstered its strategic engagements in the region through its active participation in the East Asia Summit (EAS), where it steered discussions towards maritime security strategies. This involvement in multilateral organizations was instrumental in redistributing regional power and reducing the dominance of any single nation, particularly in the context of military and strategic concerns. President Obama sought to restore confidence in America's commitment to Asia by shifting the focus of US foreign policy from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq back to the Asia-Pacific region. He pledged to mitigate military budget cuts that could impact the region, emphasizing a sustained American presence as a key element of security strategy. While aiming for a productive relationship with China, Obama's policies were perceived by some Chinese leaders as antagonistic, reflecting the difficulties of fostering diplomatic engagement while also asserting US influence.[117]

Domestically, the credibility of the United States' pivot strategy was contingent upon its ability to recover from the 2008 financial crisis and to demonstrate that it was not in significant

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[115] Lieberthal, Kenneth G. "The American Pivot to Asia." *Brookings*, 21 Dec. 2011, www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/.

[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

decline. Enhancing relationships with Southeast Asia and addressing issues such as North Korean nuclear proliferation and environmental concerns, including clean energy projects, were key components of Obama's strategy.[118] However, skeptics questioned the viability of the pivot, pointing to constraints such as defense budget cuts, economic downturns, and limited military personnel.[119]

Despite these hurdles, the pivot yielded substantial successes in alliance building and in signaling to Asian countries that the US was attentive to the region's challenges. By the end of Obama's administration, US strategies had alleviated earlier concerns in South Korea about potential American rashness towards North Korea, establishing a security buffer that helped to protect South Korean interests independently of China. Public opinion in South Korea showed strong support for the US-Korea alliance, with significant majorities recognizing the alliance's importance.[120]

The robust support for the US-Korea alliance was further evidenced by compelling survey data from March 16-18, 2014, that revealed public views on the presence and activities of US forces in Korea (see Figure 1). While concerns about the stationing and management of troops persisted as the top issue among 17.6% of respondents, only 7.6% believed that relocating

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[118] The White House Office of the Press Secretary. "Fact Sheet: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific." *The White House President Barack Obama*, National Archives and Records Administration, 16 Nov. 2015, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific.

[119] Herb, Jeremy. "Is Obama Pivot to Asia on Hold?" *The Hill*, The Hill, 30 Mar. 2014, thehill.com/policy/defense/202092-is-obama-pivot-to-asia-on-hold/.

[120] The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2014." *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 19 Apr. 2014, en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/.

US forces in Korea was the most pressing issue of the alliance. This indicates an increasingly favorable perception of the US military's presence, suggesting that the notion of a complete withdrawal was less appealing to the South Korean public. Moreover, the survey highlighted the widespread consensus on the alliance's critical role in future security arrangements: a commanding 93.3% of South Koreans affirmed the necessity of the US-Korean alliance. This sentiment held strong even in the context of potential reunification, with 66% supporting the alliance's continuation in such an eventuality. Additionally, substantial majorities—86.9% for US-led disaster relief efforts and 64.5% for overseas deployments—voiced their approval for active participation of Korean troops in international operations under US auspices. [121]

Figure 1: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (2014).

These statistics not only confirm the strategic alignment between South Korean public opinion and US diplomatic and security efforts but also reflect a pragmatic understanding of the

[121] Ibid.

mutual benefits derived from the alliance. As South Korea continues to navigate its evolving regional security environment, the perspectives illuminated in these surveys will play a critical role in shaping the nation's defense policies and its collaborative tactics with the United States.

However, while substantial support for the US-Korea alliance clearly indicates a recognition of its strategic benefits, the data from the surveys also highlight an underlying tension and a desire for greater autonomy within this partnership. Specifically, while a significant majority upholds the importance of the alliance for future security, there remains a noticeable contingent of the South Korean population that advocates for more control over their own military forces and the conditions under which US forces are stationed in South Korea. This conflict of opinion is reflected in the relatively small, yet significant, proportion of respondents who support the idea of Operational Control (OPCON) transfer (28.8%). This perspective suggests a dynamic where, alongside valuing the alliance as a cornerstone of security cooperation, there is also a prevailing sentiment among some South Koreans for increased sovereignty over military decisions and a reduced footprint of foreign troops on their soil.[122]

This duality in public opinion captures the broader debate within South Korea about offsetting the undoubted security benefits derived from the alliance with the United States against a growing national confidence and desire for greater autonomy in defense matters. It accentuates the ongoing dialogue between maintaining robust international security ties and advancing a national agenda that seeks to redefine and possibly recalibrate the terms of military cooperation to better reflect South Korea's evolving strategic priorities and its enhanced capabilities. Therefore, although the alliance maintains its fundamental importance, the data also prompts policymakers to contemplate modifications that could tackle these domestic issues,

[122] Ibid.

guaranteeing the partnership's continued perception as essential, mutually respectful, and adaptable to evolving circumstances.

4. Japanese Political Shift to the Right

In the early 2000s, the relationship between South Korea and Japan was marked by escalating tensions due to several provocative actions by Japan. These actions included disputes over the portrayal of historical events in Japanese educational textbooks, repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and inflammatory remarks from the Japanese Foreign Minister. These events not only reignited painful historical grievances but also strained bilateral relations and affected broader regional activities.[123] This period was further characterized by a noticeable shift in Japan's domestic politics towards the right, which influenced its approach to historical issues and its post-World War II pacifist security posture.

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership, Japan undertook a significant reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution, allowing for a more assertive defense strategy.[124] This move, seen positively by the United States, was considered a strategic enhancement to neutralize China's rising influence, especially pertinent in the context of China's Air Defense Identification Zone overlapping with those of Japan and South Korea.[125] However, Abe's 2013

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[123] Hyun, Dae-Song, ed. The Historical Perceptions of Korea and Japan: Its Origins and Points of the Issues Concerning Dokdo-Takeshima, Yasukuni Shrine, Comfort Women, and Textbooks. Paju Book City, ROK: Nanam, 2008.

[124] Institute for Security and Development Policy. "Amending Japan's Pacifist Constitution - Article 9 and Prime Minister Abe." *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, Apr. 2018, www.isdp.eu/publication/amending-japans-pacifist-constitution/.

[125] Harlan, Chico. "China Creates New Air Defense Zone in East China Sea Amid Dispute with Japan." *The Washington Post*, 23 Nov. 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-creates-

visit to Yasukuni Shrine, against US advice, led to criticism by the US, reflecting the complex bond of US-Japan relations where strategic interests are sometimes at odds with historical sensitivities.[126]

The evolution of US-Japan military relations concerned South Korea, fearing regional power imbalances. A 2014 study showed that 79.3% of South Koreans felt a need to recalibrate their security stance, possibly leaning more towards China as a countermeasure to strengthened US-Japan ties.[127] Despite this, US criticisms of Japan's actions provided some reassurance to South Korea of its valued strategic partnership. During this time, the US played a proactive diplomatic role in mediating issues like the "comfort women" dispute, aiming to stabilize the trilateral alliance with Japan and South Korea. The resolution of this issue, marked by the Foreign Ministers' Meeting between the Republic of Korea and Japan on December 28, 2015, led to an agreed 1 billion yen paid by the Japanese government to compensate South Korean victims and served as a significant step towards improving bilateral and trilateral relations. Although the

new-air-defense-zone-in-east-china-sea-amid-dispute-with-japan/2013/11/23/c415f1a8-5416-11e3-9ee6-2580086d8254_story.html.

[126] U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan. "Statement on Prime Minister Abe's December 26 Visit to Yasukuni Shrine." *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan*, 26 Dec. 2013, japan2.usembassy.gov/e/p/2013/tp-20131226-01.html#:~:text=Statement%20on%20Prime%20Minister%20Abe's%20December%2026%20Visit%20to%20Yasukuni%20Shrine&text=Japan%20is%20a%20valued%20ally,exacerbate%20tensions%20with%20Japan's%20neighbors.

[127] The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2014." *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 19 Apr. 2014, en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/.

agreement faced challenges later, it was initially seen as a critical moment for both nations to move forward from their historical disputes.[128]

This resolution facilitated enhanced trilateral cooperation, including intelligence sharing and joint military exercises, preparing the nations for coordinated responses to regional threats. The strengthening of these diplomatic and military ties demonstrated the potential for overcoming historical animosities in favor of shared strategic interests. As this trilateral relationship continues to develop, the significance of the US as a mediator in Japan-South Korea disputes remains key. This role helps maintain harmonious relations within the alliance, ensuring that historical issues do not undermine collective security efforts.[129] The evolving dynamics underline the strategic importance of Japan and South Korea to the US as key allies in East Asia, particularly in adjusting against China's regional assertiveness and inflaming actions by North Korea.[130] As Japan adopts a more assertive military role, it also necessitates careful US diplomacy to manage potential tensions with South Korea, thus maintaining stability in the alliance framework.

Moreover, the strengthening of these relationships later paved the way for agreements such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2016, which reiterates the intertwined nature of these partnerships. As the trilateral relationship matures, with

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[128] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Japan-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 28 Dec. 2015, www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000365.html.

[129] Phan, Xuan Dung. "How the US Can Mediate the Japan-South Korea Dispute." *The Diplomat*, The Diplomat, 16 Dec. 2020, thediplomat.com/2020/12/how-the-us-can-mediate-the-japan-south-korea-dispute/.

[130] Aoki, Yoshiyuki. "What Comes After S. Korea Reverses Decision to End GSOMIA?" *NHK World Japan*, 25 Nov. 2019, www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/763/.

ongoing initiatives and agreements, the collective security framework of the US, Japan, and South Korea becomes increasingly crucial in managing regional threats and fostering stability in Northeast Asia. This scenario demonstrates the ongoing necessity of cooperation and the importance of each country's role within this strategic alliance, despite the underlying historical tensions that occasionally surface.[131]

The strengthening trilateral relationship among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, exemplified by agreements such as GSOMIA and collaborative military exercises, has significant implications for Korea-US relations. This deepening cooperation demonstrates the United States' commitment to the security of South Korea and its strategic position in Northeast Asia, which has increasingly been viewed positively by the South Korean public. As the US continues to mediate historical and ongoing disputes between South Korea and Japan, its role as a stabilizing force has been reinforced, helping to ameliorate some of the mistrust or skepticism that previously fueled protests against the Status of Forces Agreement. Consequently, as these international relationships yield tangible security benefits, the South Korean public's perception of the SOFA and its operational implications will continue to shift alongside it in part. With a greater appreciation for the protective and strategic benefits provided by the US military presence, there is a corresponding decrease in the intensity and frequency of public protests demanding major reforms to SOFA. This evolving public sentiment points to a broader understanding of the interconnected security operations and a recognition that cooperative international relations serve as a cornerstone for national and regional stability. As a result, the

[131] Park, Sangbo. "Implications of the General Security of Military Information Agreement for South Korea." *Stimson Center*, 16 Dec. 2016, www.stimson.org/2016/implications-general-security-military-information-agreement-south-korea/.

focus has subtly shifted from demanding unilateral SOFA reforms to fostering a more level approach that seeks to maximize mutual benefits while maintaining sovereignty and respect for domestic concerns.[132]

5. 2015 Anthrax Issue and Public Response

In 2015, a significant biosecurity incident occurred when live anthrax samples were accidentally sent to Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. The shipment was intended for testing US military equipment to ensure its effectiveness against a potential bacteriological attack, amid concerns about North Korea's capabilities in this area. The shipment inadvertently exposed 22 individuals to the anthrax spores, although, fortunately, there were no fatalities reported as all exposed received prompt medical treatment. Anthrax, a dormant spore, can become an activated bacterium once inside the host, rapidly multiplying and causing severe illness.[133]

The incident spurred an investigation that led to calls for revisions to the Status of Forces Agreement, specifically advocating for enhanced documentation for shipments of biological agents. Article 9, Section 5 of the SOFA stipulates that "customs examination shall not be made in the following cases: […] c) military cargo consigned to the United States armed forces," [134]

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[132] Nordenburg, Isak. "Friends, Whether They Like It or Not: U.S.-ROK-Japan." *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, 10 Jan. 2023, www.isdp.se/friends-whether-they-like-it-or-not-u-s-rok-japan/.

[133] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "How People Get Anthrax." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 20 Nov. 2020, www.cdc.gov/anthrax/transmission/index.html.

[134] United States Department of State. Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea concerning the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea. 1966. https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Contracting/Contractor%20Links%20Sept%2015/US-ROK%20SOFA_1966-67.pdf

which underscored the regulatory gaps that the incident had highlighted. The swift acknowledgment of the mistake by US authorities and the immediate steps taken to mitigate any further issues exemplified a responsible approach to such a serious breach. The investigation into the anthrax shipment incident was conducted by the US-ROK Biological Defense Cooperation Joint Working Group (JWG), symbolizing a collaborative effort between the two nations. This joint response not only demonstrated mutual respect but also allowed for significant South Korean involvement in rectifying the breach, showcasing a contrast in handling sensitive military matters compared to past incidents.[135]

While the 2015 anthrax accident at Osan Air Base did provoke some negative reactions, the incident led to significantly less dramatic anti-SOFA protests compared to the vehement public outcry following the 2002 Yangju highway incident. Nonetheless, certain international media outlets with pronounced anti-American views were quick to capitalize on the event, attempting to intensify the negative aspects of the narrative. Although the South Korean progressive media was most critical of not informing the government prior to sample shipment to ensure public safety[136], reports from adversarial states such as China interwove the incident with historical grievances, referencing contentious allegations about the use of biological weapons by the US during the Korean War. Such publications revisited these allegations, suggesting past

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[135] USFK. "ROK – U.S. Alliance Biological Defense Cooperation Joint Working Group Visits Osan Air Base." *United States Forces Korea*, 6 Aug. 2015, www.usfk.mil/Media/Newsroom/News/Article/613532/rok-us-alliance-biological-defense-cooperation-joint-working-group-visits-osan/.

[136] Park, Byong-su. "US Shipped Anthrax to S. Korea 16 Times Since 2009." *Hankyoreh*, 18 Dec. 2015, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/722554.html.

instances of anthrax use as a bioweapon by the US [137], although these claims are heavily disputed and lack consensus among historians and experts.[138] This resurrection of historical accusations serves to perpetuate and, at times, exacerbate anti-American sentiment within sections of the South Korean public.

These news sources also identified this incident as a violation of the UN Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Article I of the BWC states that:

> "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes never in any circumstances to develop, produce, stockpile or otherwise acquire or retain: 1. microbial or other biological agents, or toxins whatever their origin or method of production, of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes."[139]

Since both South Korea and the US are signatories to the BWC, the shipment of anthrax, despite being for defensive testing, sparked debate over the adherence to these international norms. In spite of the severity of the allegations surrounding various security incidents, the coverage by South Korean conservative media outlets often tended to downplay the potential dangers, focusing instead on the remedial actions being taken and the overall management of the incidents

[137] Yoo, Seungki. "World Insights: South Korea Gripped with Fear over U.S. Bioweapons Labs." *Xinhua,* 4 Apr. 2022, english.news.cn/20220412/861b16b27f524d1d862c1801318dc6e2/c.html.

[138] Endicott, Stephen, and Edward Hagerman. "United States Biological Warfare during the Korean War: Rhetoric and Reality." *York University,* June 2002, www.yorku.ca/sendicot/ReplytoColCrane.htm.

[139] "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction," opened for signature April 10, 1972, London, Moscow, and Washington. *United Nations.* https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.37_conv%20biological%20weapons.pdf.

to ensure public safety.[140] This approach to reporting highlights a prevailing media tendency to prioritize discussions of resolution over assigning culpability or delving deeply into the implications of such security lapses. Such framing is likely aimed at maintaining public calm and sustaining trust in international military operations and agreements.

Despite the anti-American segments within the media landscape's attempts to mobilize public demonstrations against the SOFA, these attempts were visibly less effective than similar efforts in the past. This muted response can be largely attributed to a variety of factors, most notably the renewed strength and confidence in the US-ROK alliance. Over time, the strategic and economic benefits of this partnership have been increasingly recognized, bolstering a more robust bilateral relationship capable of withstanding isolated incidents of contention. As a result, while historical grievances and immediate concerns may still resonate with certain factions within South Korea, the broader public consensus regarding the value of the US-ROK alliance has significantly tempered the scale and intensity of SOFA protest actions. The general populace seems to appreciate the stabilizing effects and security benefits provided by this international partnership, which in turn diminishes the impact of calls for large-scale protests. Thus, the combination of strategic media framing and a solid bilateral relationship contributes to a more measured public response to potential controversies surrounding US-ROK military cooperation.

V) Trend Analysis

1. Media Influence

[140] Chang, Jae-soon. "(3rd LD) U.S. Calls Shipment of Live Anthrax Sample 'Inexcusable Mistake.'" *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 July 2015, en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20150724000253315.

The pervasive influence of media in shaping public perceptions and informing societal discourse is undeniable. News organizations exercise considerable authority, not only in selecting topics for coverage but also in strategically framing these issues to support specific political narratives. Despite South Korea's designation as "free" by the Freedom House index, the nation's media landscape is subtly yet significantly shaped by its hierarchical culture. In this context, political elites possess the capacity to discreetly manipulate news coverage through covert interactions, thereby directing journalistic focus and shaping public discourse. Moreover, the media environment in South Korea is restrained by stringent libel laws that pose a threat to journalistic freedom. These laws often lead to a form of self-censorship among journalists, who may avoid contentious topics that could invite legal challenges, even if the reported facts are verifiable. This legal framework effectively ensures that media content frequently aligns with the interests and perspectives of the prevailing political authority, thereby reinforcing the government's narrative.[141]

Under South Korean progressive presidencies, there is a discernible amplification of progressive viewpoints within media outputs. Conversely, conservative administrations see a similar elevation of conservative perspectives. This oscillation between political extremes, depending on the ruling party, illustrates the profound impact of political influence on media operations. Such a mechanism not only strengthens the voice of the party in power but also has the potential to overshadow opposing views. In this interaction between media and politics, South Korean newspapers frequently exhibit a pronounced bias, typically aligning with the

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[141] Kim, Hun Shik. "Media, the Public, and Freedom of the Press." *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 62/63, Apr. 2003, pp. 355–357, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27527099.

ideological leanings of specific political factions. This alignment can result in a highly polarized media landscape where proportionate coverage is sacrificed for partisan loyalty, reducing the diversity of viewpoints available to the public and potentially skewing public perception and discourse. As a consequence, the media's role as a neutral informant is compromised, influencing the democratic process and the quality of public debate in South Korea.[142]

To illustrate the importance of media influence within the context of the US-ROK alliance, this section will undertake an in-depth analysis of the data collated by Gi-Wook Shin, which examines the media response to several key events in South Korea from 1992-2003. Utilizing data from leading conservative publication Chosun Ilbo and its progressive counterpart Hankyoreh, Shin's research facilitates a comparative analysis that reveals distinct patterns in media coverage. Table 1, which categorizes articles according to their focus topics, serves as a critical tool in this investigation. The table indicates that both progressive and conservative newspapers predominantly publish articles related to the United States and its bilateral relations with South Korea. This trend highlights the significant attention that the Korean media devotes to international relations, particularly involving the United States.[143]

[142] Shin, Gi-Wook. "The Media and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: The South Korean Case." *EAI Asia Security Initiative*, May 2011, pp. 5, http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/2011052515462169.pdf.

[143] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

Table 1 **Article Count by Focus Category**

Focus	Chosun	Hankyoreh	Total
U.S.	467 49.8%	304 38.63%	771 44.7%
U.S.-ROK	263 28.1%	295 37.5%	558 32.3%
U.S.-DPRK	171 18.3%	169 21.5%	340 19.7%
Other	36 3.8%	19 2.4%	55 3.2%
Total	937 100%	787 100%	1,724 100%

Source: Shin (2010, 85).

By further breaking down the US and US-ROK categories from Table 1 into the most prevalent issues for each newspaper, as illustrated in Table 2, a stark distinction appears. To begin, almost half of progressive paper, Hankyoreh's U.S article publications are based on security. On the other hand, Chosun more evenly distributes its content across security, US politics, and economy/ trade. US politics reigns as the most prevalent issue for the conservative newspaper based on the number of publications. Despite these differences in thematic focus, both newspapers allocate the majority of their US-ROK related articles to security topics. However, Hankyoreh allocates a significantly larger proportion of its coverage to this issue (68.27%) compared to Chosun (48.62%), showcasing a heightened sensitivity to the implications of US military presence. Moreover, when analyzing the tone of the coverage, it becomes evident that Hankyoreh is more likely to adopt a critical or negative tone when addressing security concerns.[144]

[144] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

Table 2 **Most Prevalent Issues by Focus Category**

		Chosun (%)	Hankyoreh (%)	Total (%)
U.S.				
	Security	28.15	47.38	35.74
	U.S. Politics	34.12	17.97	27.74
	Economy/Trade	18.34	18.95	18.58
U.S.-ROK				
	Security	48.62	68.27	59.09
	Economy/trade	18.43	13.45	15.78
	Foreign Affairs	18.82	8.97	13.58

Source: Shin (2010, 85).

These US-ROK security concerns manifest most greatly in the form of US troops in South Korea across party lines (Table 3). Notably, Hankyoreh dedicates more than twice the number of articles to the subject of US troops compared to Chosun Ilbo. This disparity aligns with the political climate prevalent during the early phases of the Sunshine Policy, where progressives, reflective of the sentiments during the presidencies of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, perceived North Korea less as an adversary and more as a fraternal entity in need of support. Consequently, only a minimal percentage (3.72%) of Hankyoreh's coverage addresses North Korean weapons of mass destruction, suggesting a deliberate editorial choice to downplay threats and foster a narrative of reconciliation and cooperation. In stark contrast, Chosun Ilbo allocates over twice the percentage of its total coverage to North Korean WMDs and anti-American sentiment within South Korea. Although anti-Americanism still represents a relatively small fraction of overall coverage (8.37%), it signifies a more pronounced concern within conservative circles about the threats posed by North Korea and the perceived erosion of US-South Korean relations. This perspective is indicative of a broader conservative inclination to uphold the security alliance with the United States as a strategic counterbalance to North Korean aggression and instability.

These editorial choices not only reflect the divergent political landscapes underpinning the administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun but also highlight the broader ideological divisions within South Korean society regarding the role and necessity of US forces on the peninsula. The coverage of these issues in major newspapers provides a lens through which the public receives and interprets the sophisticated mechanisms of international relations and national security, revealing how media can shape and influence policy discourse and public perception through selective emphasis and framing of security issues.[145]

Table 3 Most Prevalent Subject Matters by Focus Category

Subject	Chosun (%)	Hankyoreh (%)	Total (%)
U.S.			
U.S. Domestic Politics	22.29	7.84	16.60
U.S. Economy/Industry	15.92	14.71	15.44
U.S. Security	9.98	18.95	13.51
U.S. Election	11.46	9.48	10.68
Security of Iraq	4.25	10.13	6.56
U.S.-ROK			
U.S. Troops in South Korea	23.95	50.34	37.92
U.S.-South Korea Trade	15.97	12.16	13.95
Other Diplomacy	10.65	4.73	7.51
DPRK WMD	11.03	3.72	7.16
Anti-Americanism in ROK	8.37	4.05	6.08

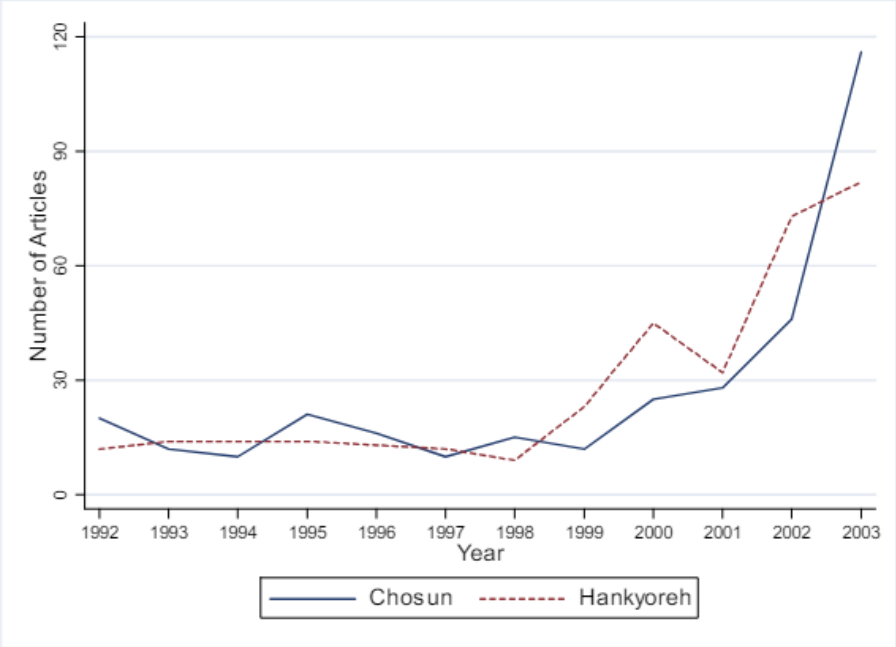
Source: Shin (2010, 87).

The prominence of US-ROK relations within media discourse had not always been as marked as observed in the early 2000's. According to data visualized in Figure 1, a significant climb in media attention to the US-ROK alliance commenced in 1998 with Hankyoreh, followed closely by Chosun Ilbo in 1999. This escalation in coverage of South Korea's bilateral relationship with the United States coincided with the election of Kim Dae Jung and the

[145] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

inception of the Sunshine Policy, alongside the genesis of broader coalition efforts aimed at addressing grievances concerning the US military presence on the peninsula.

Figure 1: Media Attention to U.S.-ROK Relations



Source: Shin (2010, 89).

Hankyoreh was at the forefront of this trend, primarily due to the traditional perception of the US presence as a bulwark against North Korean aggression. However, with Kim Dae Jung's initiatives promising improved inter-Korean relations, Hankyoreh swiftly adopted the narrative that US forces were becoming redundant, asserting that South Korea had matured beyond the need for external intervention and protection. This stance was somewhat at odds with Kim Dae Jung's public affirmation of the alliance's importance for regional security. Despite this, Hankyoreh's coverage had a palpable impact on shaping public opinion and, consequently, on influencing governmental policy decisions. The newspaper's framing of the issue fostered a climate conducive to reevaluating the traditional security paradigm, advocating for a more autonomous approach in South Korea's dealings with the United States. Thus, through strategic media framing, Hankyoreh not only reflected but also propelled shifts in public sentiment and

policy orientation towards a stance that increasingly emphasized sovereignty and self-determination in international relations.[146]

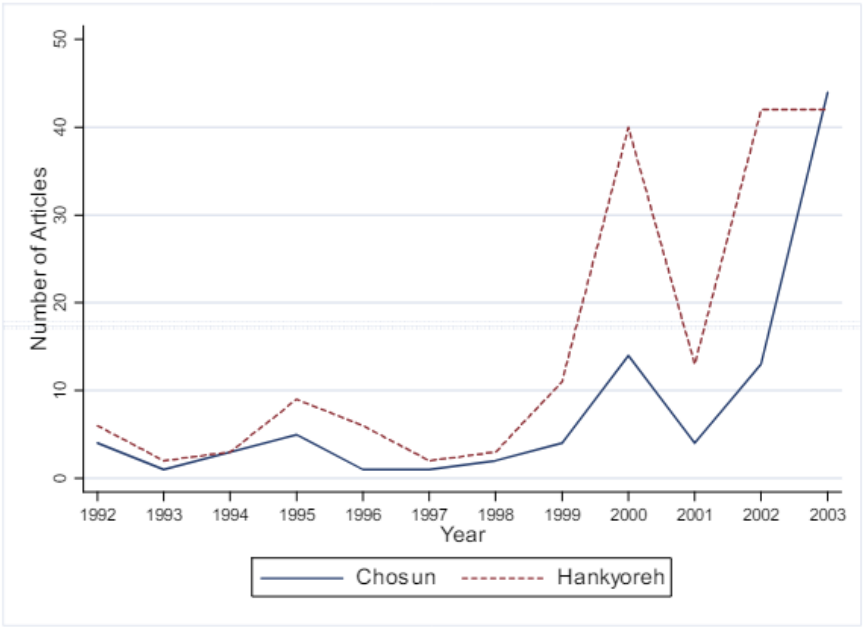
During 2002 to 2003, a marked escalation in the focus on US-ROK relations is observable within the editorial content of Chosun Ilbo. This intensified interest aligns temporally with the Yangju highway accident, a critical incident that significantly shaped public discourse at the time. The augmented coverage by Chosun Ilbo can be interpreted as a strategic response to the rising anti-American sentiment that was gaining traction rapidly across the nation. One plausible explanation for this shift in focus involves the newspaper's attempt to mitigate the impact of negative narratives surrounding US military presence in South Korea. Although conservative outlets like Chosun Ilbo harbored some reservations about the US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula, the prospect of a complete withdrawal elicited greater concerns. This apprehension likely served as a motivating factor for the newspaper to bolster its coverage of US-ROK relations. Such a strategic editorial choice reflects a broader media tendency to influence and steer public opinion during periods of heightened political sensitivity. By amplifying certain aspects of the bilateral relationship, particularly in the context of its strategic and security implications, Chosun Ilbo aimed to temper the anti-American narratives and enforce the perceived necessity of maintaining a robust alliance with the United States, thus shaping the contours of public debate in a manner that favored a more level view of the ongoing military cooperation.[147]

In the brief period subsequent to the 2001 SOFA amendment, there was a noticeable de-escalation in the coverage of US troops stationed in South Korea. Both Hankyoreh and Chosun

[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

reported a significant reduction in the frequency of such articles in 2000-2001, as evidenced in Figure 2. This decline can be attributed to the resolution of issues concerning SOFA inequalities and a shift in focus towards enhanced inter-peninsular dialogue following the landmark 2000 Summit. However, the global geopolitical landscape underwent a dramatic transformation after the September 11 attacks on the United States, and subsequent shifts in US foreign policy under President George W. Bush, notably the inclusion of North Korea in the so-called "axis of evil." These developments recontextualized the role and perception of US forces on the Korean Peninsula. The initial optimism for a peaceful resolution of SOFA-related tensions was overshadowed by increasing perceptions of the United States as a destabilizing force, particularly after its aggressive stance towards North Korea was made clear. This perception shift led to heightened scrutiny and criticism, particularly from Hankyoreh, which increasingly voiced opposition against US policies.[148]

Figure 2 **Media Attention to U.S. Troops in ROK**



Source: Shin (2010, 92).

[148] Ibid., pp. 10-12.

From 2002 to 2003, while the number of related publications from Hankyoreh plateaued, Chosun's coverage continued to increase, possibly influenced by the unfolding events of the Iraq War, which diverted US attention away from the Korean Peninsula. The initiation of the Six Party Talks in 2003, aimed at addressing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, did little to assuage fears about the potential consequences of a US withdrawal. Public hesitancy regarding the removal of US forces began to solidify during this period, amidst ongoing concerns about North Korea's WMD capabilities. [149]

Moreover, the media's focus during this period was also influenced by other significant events, such as South Korea co-hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup. The national pride and celebration associated with this global event may have temporarily shifted media attention away from more contentious issues such as the Yangju highway incident. This diversion reflects a broader trend within media coverage to balance between reporting on immediate political and security concerns and engaging with culturally significant, unifying national events that fostered a positive national identity, rather than dwelling excessively on divisive issues.[150]

Beyond traditional newspapers, the advent of digital media has revolutionized information dissemination, facilitating instantaneous access to news and enabling rapid mobilization of societal movements. Events like the Yangju highway incident and Roh Moo Hyun's election underscore the mobilizing power of digital platforms, particularly among the youth demographic. Large-scale protests organized online, independent of traditional media coverage, demonstrate the capacity of digital media to galvanize collective action and shape public opinion. In essence, while traditional news media primes readers on pertinent issues,

[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.

digital platforms empower individuals to actively engage with and respond to societal concerns, facilitating grassroots activism and democratic participation.[151]

Understanding public sentiment is crucial in democratic societies, as it often influences policymaking and electoral outcomes. Elected officials must heed the concerns of the electorate to secure re-election and maintain legitimacy. While exceptions exist, such as Roh Moo Hyun's decision to withhold combat troop deployment to Iraq despite public opinion, policymakers generally prioritize aligning with public sentiment to garner support and legitimacy. Thus, monitoring and interpreting public discourse and media narratives are essential for policymakers seeking to effectively address public concerns.

2. Population Demographic

As of March 2015, a recorded 1,813,037 individuals born in a foreign country were residing in South Korea.[152] This is a 400% increase from 2000 when South Korea first reached the status of a net immigration country. While still a homogenous society, this shift shows the impact of increased globalization.[153] After 2005's passing of the Public Official Election Act enabling foreign residents to vote in local elections, South Korea became the only Asian country which gives voting rights to non-citizens. Additionally, South Korea has made it easier for

[151] Kim, Hun Shik. "Media, the Public, and Freedom of the Press." *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 62/63, Apr. 2003, pp. 352–353, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27527099.

[152] Moon, Katharine H.S. "South Korea's Demographic Changes and their Political Impact." *East Asia Policy Paper*, no. 6, Oct. 2015, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/South-Koreas-demographic-changes-and-their-political-impact.pdf.

[153] OECD. "Evolution and Characteristics of Labour Migration to Korea." *Recruiting Immigrant Workers: Korea 2019*, OECD Publishing, Paris, France, 2019, pp. 43–66.

migrants to receive permanent resident status and even citizenship.[154] The continued shift towards a reduction in the homogeneity of the society will allow foreign voices to become more prevalent through votes. Since public opinion is widely influenced by nationalistic identity among South Koreans, the increase of outside input could begin to shake or strengthen such trends while also influencing the perception of what it means to be Korean. Especially as Korea's birthrate continues to drop, foreign influence will be needed for the country to have successors.

In the case of the Korean diaspora, we have seen a rise in both cheap and skilled laborers returning back to Korea as migrants since the early 1990's. with more than 11% of the ethnically Korean population living outside of Korea as of 2011, they have been an important factor in the engagement of globalization efforts and economic expansion of South Korea. Although there are concerns as to the cost of maintaining networks for the overseas Koreans since they do not pay government taxes or serve in the military for men, the benefits of the connections they make and the impact of their returning skilled labor has incentivized the government to continue such programs. Additionally, establishing such norms is a possible helper for combatting the declining birth rates. Abroad, school tends to be less stressful, work-life balance may be better, and overall opportunities to grow in your career as a parent aren't as limited. Since the US has one of the largest Korean diaspora populations, maintaining connections with gyopos and their home countries help to foster the US-ROK relationship as well as reap the economic benefits.[155] This

[154] Kalinowski, Thomas, and Sang-young Rhyu. "2015 South Korea Country Report ." *Sustainable Governance Indicators*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 17, 2015, www.sgi-network.org/docs/2015/country/SGI2015_South_Korea.pdf.

[155] Song, Changzoo. "Engaging the Diaspora in an Era of Transnationalism." *IZA World of Labor*, 1 May 2014, wol.iza.org/articles/engaging-the-diaspora-in-an-era-of-transnationalism/long.

interconnectedness of a population with a shared identity between both South Korea and America serves as a foothold for positive Korean relations and ability to mitigate shared tensions as Koreans can speak up on US soil and advocate for themselves abroad better. This ability can bring attention to their cause back home and raise awareness more effectively, helping to ensure the US doesn't overlook the importance of Korea as a strategic ally.

3. Time

Historically, the end of the Cold War marked the United States' emergence as the dominant global superpower in a unipolar world order. The only country seemingly on the rise at the time was China, but it started so far behind that its growth did not threaten the United States until decades later. However, this unchallenged dominance frequently cast the US in the role of a hegemon, often criticized for imposing its will internationally, particularly through its military interventions in the Middle East. These actions sometimes tarnished America's global image, portraying it as an overbearing force coercing other nations to align with its interests.[156] In contrast, the current multipolar world order has somewhat reshaped perceptions of the United States. As power becomes more diffused among emerging superpowers like China, the US is increasingly seen as a stabilizing force that collaborates with and offsets against other major powers. This role necessitates a more nuanced approach, emphasizing diplomacy and multilateral engagement over unilateral coercion. Consequently, the US is now perceived as more cooperative, rather than just as an imperious unilateral actor.

[156] Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment Revisited." *The National Interest*, The Center for the National Interest, 2 Dec. 2002, nationalinterest.org/article/the-unipolar-moment-revisited-391.

China's unprecedented rise in global stature, particularly noted when its economy surpassed that of the United States in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2014, poses significant implications for global power structure.[157] While the US continues to lead in nominal GDP, the rapid ascent of China demonstrates a critical shift in global economic power where 10 to 20 years prior, the United States was relatively unchallenged. To handle this transition and avoid falling into the so-called "Thucydides Trap" — a historical analogy that suggests rising powers often clash with established ones — both nations are compelled to engage in careful negotiation, respecting each other's military and economic standings to circumvent a potential conflict.[158]

This evolving geopolitical landscape holds profound implications for South Korea's foreign policy in the 21st century. Historically subject to the coercive power tactics of its alliance with the United States, particularly evident in the negotiation of the Status of Forces Agreement, South Korea now finds itself in a more empowered position. As the US recalibrates its strategies to maintain its influence in East Asia, particularly in balancing against China, it must offer commitments to South Korea that are more advantageous than those potentially offered by China. Due to China's history with South Korea and the continued quest for regional control akin

[157] Euromonitor International. "China Overtakes the US as the World's Largest Economy: Impact on Industries and Consumers Worldwide." *Euromonitor International*, 2014, forms.iimk.ac.in/libportal/reports/China-Overtakes-US-Worlds-Largest-Economy-White-Paper-Euromonitor-Report.pdf.

[158] Dalio, Ray. *Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order*. Simon & Schuster, pp. 209-210, 2021.

to past tributary systems, South Korea no longer wishes to be in the position of being seen as a weak, younger-brother nation.[159]

This dynamic is further complicated by stable Sino-DPRK relations, positioning South Korea to seek a stabilizing approach in its international alignments. The US-ROK alliance, once markedly asymmetric, has evolved into a more symbiotic relationship, reflecting the broader shift toward a multipolar world where no single nation can indefinitely maintain supreme power. As such, the United States is prompted to explore alternative strategies to sustain its status as a major global power, navigating a landscape where its influence is checked by other rising powers. This transition marks the strategic recalibrations necessary for South Korea as it seeks to leverage its enhanced agency to foster long-term growth and security within this complex international milieu.

At the domestic level, the passage of time often serves as a moderating force on public sentiment, gradually diminishing the intensity of even the most fervent reactions to historical events. This phenomenon was poignantly illustrated in an interview conducted on the tenth anniversary of the Yangju highway incident. During this interview, the family of Shim Miseon and Shin Hyosun, whose deaths had initially ignited widespread outrage against the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement that seemingly obstructed justice, no longer expressed overt anger. Instead, they appeared resigned and expressed a desire to move beyond the lingering pain and frustration.[160]

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[159] Ibid., pp. 454-455.

[160] Jin, Myeong-seon. "Tenth Anniversary of Girls Killed by US Military Armored Vehicle." *Hankyoreh*, 12 June 2012, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/537291.

This shift in perspective is emblematic of a broader psychological and social process in which individuals tend to transition from acute grief to a more sustainable state of coping and adaptation. Similarly, the broader public's attention has progressively shifted away from this specific incident to address newly emerging challenges and concerns within the peninsula. As media focus pivoted from the Yangju highway incident to other pressing issues, the collective solidarity that had once unified many South Koreans in opposition to perceived injustices associated with the American military presence had waned. This transition highlights a fundamental aspect of human behavior: the innate capacity to adapt and recover in the face of adversity. Rather than maintaining a permanent fixation on past grievances, societies tend to redirect their focus toward current and future challenges. This adaptive response not only reflects a sensible approach to collective memory and historical injustices but also highlights the driven nature of public opinion and national priorities over time. [161]

As for Maehyangri, the area is poised for a transformation a decade after the closure of the Kooni Firing Range with plans to rebrand as a 'Peace Village.' This ambitious 110 billion won project aims to create an ecological park and feature art installations made from the rusted shards of bombs left by the US, symbolizing a poignant juxtaposition of past violence with current regrowth efforts. The Peace Village is envisioned as a tangible manifestation of resolution, addressing the long-standing adversities faced by the local community. [162]

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[161] Gipson, Caitlin. "The Psychology of Unity after Tragedy." *Azusa Pacific University*, 4 Nov. 2013, www.apu.edu/articles/21012/.

[162] Sohn, Ji-young. "[Eye Plus] Decades after Bombing, Maehyangri Seeks Reemergence as 'Peace Village.'" *The Korea Herald*, The Korea Herald, 1 Nov. 2018, m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20181031000940.

However, beneath the surface of this redevelopment, significant unresolved issues persist. Notably, the environmental legacy of the firing range continues to cast a shadow over the community. Lingering contaminants still adversely affect the local ecosystem, posing ongoing risks to critical economic activities such as fishing and agriculture due to soil and water contamination. The community faces a profound dilemma: vocalizing these enduring environmental issues could potentially undermine the area's rehabilitation efforts. Highlighting the ongoing contamination risks deterring investment and tourism, which are crucial for the economic revival under the new 'Peace Village' brand. Furthermore, drawing attention to these persistent problems could re-stigmatize the safety of locally harvested products. Such concerns are significant, as government compensation for these enduring harms might require public acknowledgment that local products are still exposed to harmful toxins from past military activities.[163]

Moreover, while the relocation of the firing range provided immediate relief from noise pollution, the long-term environmental effects remain largely unaddressed under the interests of the new ruling party. The community is trapped between advancing the development of the 'Peace Village' as a new source of revenue—thus potentially remaining silent on lingering contamination issues—or rallying for a cleanup effort and demanding government compensation. However, the latter could jeopardize their entire livelihood by attracting negative attention to Maehyangri. Presently, the local community's interests seem to be left championed by no one but themselves, and advocating for these interests could risk the resolved justice they seek. While

[163] Borowiec, Steven. "(Yonhap Feature) Bombing Ends, but Village Still Not Free from Past." *Yonhap News Agency*, 12 Sept. 2012, en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20120905010200315.

time can mitigate the intensity of initial outrage over injustices, it does not always resolve the underlying issues.[164]

4. Base Relocation Out of the Capital

The evolution of South Korean public sentiment regarding the relocation of US Forces Korea bases, particularly from Seoul to Pyeongtaek, has been significantly shaped by strategic, economic, security, and societal factors spanning several decades. The initiative to relocate a major USFK base to Pyeongtaek was first proposed during the presidential election of Roh Tae Woo in 1987. Although an agreement to relocate the Yongsan base was reached in 1990, substantial progress in moving US military bases from Seoul to Pyeongtaek began under Roh Moo Hyun. Momentum increased notably in July 2004 with the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative (FOTA), which aimed to consolidate existing bases in Seoul and commence relocation within a few years. Initially, the plan aimed to minimize military presence in Yongsan, retaining only essential facilities. However, delays in the OPCON transfer in 2014 resulted in the decision to maintain the Combined Forces Command in Yongsan. While South Korea's Ministry of Defense sought to reduce the Command's presence in Seoul, the USFK advocated for keeping more facilities in central Seoul than originally planned, highlighting differing national priorities regarding the presence of US military bases and their impact on public opinion.[165]

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[164] Ibid.

[165] Park, Byong-su. "US Army Base at Yongsan to Begin Relocation to Pyeongtaek This Month." *Hankyoreh,* 20 May 2016, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/744760.

A distinctive aspect of the USFK's presence in Yongsan is its central location within Seoul, a city housing nearly half of South Korea's entire population. This differs notably from Japan, where military bases historically occupy less populated and isolated regions such as Okinawa. Yongsan has been a subject of numerous complaints due to perceived safety risks to residents and constraints on urban expansion. The rapid urbanization of Seoul has not only encroached upon neighboring territories but also encumbered privately owned lands, including areas expanded by the Yongsan base. Complicating matters further, some lands utilized under the Status of Forces Agreement by the US was privately owned by Korean citizens, yet compensation from the Korean government to these landowners was infrequent. Consequently, the relocation to a more rural area was envisioned to mitigate these issues by minimizing the impact of base expansion on urban residents. While this move would address concerns of a significant urban population, it also raised apprehensions among residents of Pyeongtaek regarding potential land expropriation as I expanded on earlier. This approach aimed to satisfy the majority within Seoul but potentially disadvantaged a minority residing in rural areas affected by the relocation. [166]

Certain older Koreans perceived the US presence in Seoul as crucial for ensuring a prompt military response in the event of an attack by North Korea. They expressed concerns that reducing this presence could potentially signal vulnerability and provoke aggression from North Korea. These apprehensions were heightened following the announcement of plans to withdraw 12,500 soldiers by 2008. However, these concerns did not translate into outright disapproval of

[166] Nam, Chang-hee. "Relocating the U.S. Forces in South Korea: Strained Alliance, Emerging Partnership in the Changing Defense Posture." *Asian Survey*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2006, pp. 616–618. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2006.46.4.615. Accessed 13 June 2024.

the USFK; rather, they reflected anxieties about future security dynamics. While not universally supported among the elderly population, those who did advocate for the retention of US bases in Seoul emphasized prominent doubts regarding the efficacy of response times in the absence of nearby military personnel. This sentiment underscored their preference for maintaining US troop deployments in South Korea.[167]

However, unifying US military bases into a centralized hub offers substantial economic advantages. The dispersal of bases across the country entails significant expenses related to transportation and telecommunications.[168] By consolidating these installations into a single, cohesive hub, these logistical costs are minimized, resulting in potential savings for both the United States and the Republic of Korea. Furthermore, the presence of already-prepared accommodations for soldiers in Pyeongtaek mitigates the need for costly relocations from Seoul to Pyeongtaek in the future. This strategic consolidation not only reduces immediate financial outlays but also enhances operational efficiency and readiness. Upon completion of the transition, both nations stand to benefit financially from streamlined operations and reduced overhead costs associated with maintaining multiple dispersed bases. [169]

Anti-American sentiment likely influenced the realignment plan as well. The local population of Seoul and its surrounding areas voiced numerous complaints about issues such as noise pollution, damage to land and property, personal injuries, and other grievances, fostering a

[167] Ibid., pp. 615-616
[168] Ibid., pp. 618

[169] Gibson, Jenna. "A Conversation on USFK's Move from Yongsan to Camp Humphreys." *Korea Economic Institute of America*, 18 Jan. 2017, keia.org/the-peninsula/a-conversation-on-usfks-move-from-yongsan-to-camp-humphreys/.

generally hostile attitude towards the US military in the early 2000s. This environment had a psychological impact on US troops, who often felt unwelcome and struggled to integrate fully into the community. Tensions between the military personnel and local residents were palpable. By relocating to a less densely populated area, the US hoped to mitigate some of the existing animosity towards troops in Seoul. Such relocation aimed to enhance training efficiency through increased focus on training rather than external complaints. [170]

Conversely, the perception of South Korea's response to incidents such as the Yangju highway accident and the ensuing anti-American sentiment also had a significant impact on American public opinion. Some segments of the American population began to view South Korea as an ungrateful ally, particularly when incidents involving US military personnel provoked widespread local protests and criticism. These sentiments fueled calls from within the United States to exert pressure on Washington to consider withdrawing troops from South Korea. In response to these dynamics, the relocation measures were not solely aimed at appeasing South Koreans who were discontented with the military presence in Seoul. They also sought to address concerns among American citizens about the sustainability of US military deployments abroad and the implications of strained bilateral relations. By relocating bases to less populated areas like Pyeongtaek, the hope was to mitigate friction in urban centers while reaffirming strategic commitments in a manner that aligned with both domestic and international expectations. [171]

Based on these considerations, the relocation of military bases out of Seoul appears to have alleviated significant tensions among those most affected in the city. Public sentiment,

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[170] Nam, Chang-hee. “Relocating the U.S. Forces in South Korea: Strained Alliance, Emerging Partnership in the Changing Defense Posture.” *Asian Survey*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2006, pp. 618–619. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2006.46.4.615. Accessed 13 June 2024.

[171] Ibid., pp. 619

largely shaped by collective opinion, reflects increased satisfaction with the relocation due to the reduction of direct threats posed by military presence. Additionally, the land left unoccupied by the US military in Yongsan has plans to be converted into a public park in the near future.[172] While residents near expanding bases in Pyeongtaek may harbor concerns about potential environmental pollution and behavioral impacts, there are also perceived benefits such as economic stimulation and job creation, which contribute to local prosperity in what was previously a relatively rural area. Although some individuals continue to harbor legitimate grievances, a majority now express satisfaction that Seoul can continue its development without the hindrance of military installations and the accompanying negative effects. For those who remain directly impacted, opportunities generated by the presence of military bases may help mitigate concerns. [173] With the majority of the population no longer directly affected by bases now located in more remote areas, there is reduced public outcry on issues pertaining to US military personnel, contributing to a conceivable decrease in protests under the Status of Forces Agreement due to diminished visibility of these concerns in the capital city. In conclusion, the USFK base relocation from Seoul to Pyeongtaek has addressed various urban concerns in Seoul, appeased anti-American sentiments to some extent, and created new opportunities and challenges in Pyeongtaek.

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[172] Gibson, Jenna. "A Conversation on USFK's Move from Yongsan to Camp Humphreys." *Korea Economic Institute of America*, 18 Jan. 2017, keia.org/the-peninsula/a-conversation-on-usfks-move-from-yongsan-to-camp-humphreys/.

[173] Martin, Bridget. "From Camp Town to International City: Us Military Base Expansion and Local Development in Pyeongtaek, South Korea." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 42, no. 6, Nov. 2018, pp. 967–985, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12698.

5. Political Shift

The political landscape in South Korea has experienced significant shifts, particularly in the perceptions and orientations of its youth. Historically considered a 'wildcard' demographic with predominantly progressive leanings, there has been a noticeable shift towards conservatism among young males starting around 2015. This evolution in political perspective reflects broader social dynamics and a movement away from extreme ideologies towards more centrist stances within the country. This trend towards centrism was evident in the presidential elections of Lee Myeong-Bak and Park Geun-Hye. President Lee, while adopting a firm stance towards North Korea, maintained essential economic relations with China, recognizing the pragmatic necessity of engaging with South Korea's largest trading partner. Conversely, President Park Geun-Hye sought to cautiously rebuild inter-Korean trust over the long term, although her efforts were largely ineffective due to persistent high levels of mutual distrust.[174]

The geopolitical context of this period was further defined by the 2012 elections, a pivotal year that saw the election or re-election of significant leaders with substantial influence over Asia, including those of the United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and the ascension of Kim Jong Un in North Korea following Kim Jong Il's death. The reelection of President Obama facilitated the sustained implementation of his strategic pivot towards Asia, which was characterized by an emphasis on expanding economic ties and enhancing regional security. This policy initiative enabled the United States to consolidate its interests in East Asia. Simultaneously, it was carefully designed to avoid provoking China and escalating tensions,

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[174] Kalinowski, Thomas, and Sang-young Rhyu. "2015 South Korea Country Report." *Sustainable Governance Indicators*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 2-3, 2015, www.sgi-network.org/docs/2015/country/SGI2015_South_Korea.pdf.

particularly during the early phase of Xi Jinping's leadership. This approach not only sought to strengthen America's presence and partnerships in the region but also aimed to tame ambivalent Sino-American relations, thereby fostering a stable geopolitical environment. These changes had profound implications for regional and global processes, influencing South Korea's foreign policy and domestic political atmosphere.[175]

Despite the continuous resurfacing of anti-American sentiment, which appeared in waves throughout this period, it did not consistently translate into protests for SOFA reform. An illustrative example of this is the 2008 anti-US beef protests. While these protests were anti-American in nature, they primarily targeted economic aspects of the US-ROK bilateral relationship—a sector then-President Lee Myeong-Bak was actively trying to repair. The protests brought attention to a broader call for equitable treatment across various sectors, extending beyond just the reorganization of military presence terms. South Korea's capability to source meat from alternative suppliers facilitated public pressure on the administration to reimpose the ban on imported US beef.[176]

Furthermore, the tenure of both Lee and Park was marked by significant controversies related to the suppression of civil liberties. Lee's administration in 2008 misused national security laws to promote a political agenda against North Korea, leading to fines and imprisonment for individuals expressing pro-North Korean sentiments. Park's tenure faced severe criticism for her handling of the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster and her subsequent efforts to

[175] Steinberg, James B. "2012—a watershed year for East Asia?" *Asia Policy*, no. 14, July 2012, pp. 21–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2012.0022.

[176] Ho, Ming-sho, and Chen-Shuo Hong. "Challenging New Conservative Regimes in South Korea and Taiwan Comparison of the Anti-American Beef Protests." *Asian Survey*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2012, pp. 655, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.4.643.

control negative media content about her administration through defamation laws.[177] These internal issues, combined with the claimed centrism of both leaders, often overshadowed their foreign policy initiatives and led to a redirection of public focus towards resolving domestic problems. This internal focus somewhat diminished public attention on external grievances, including longstanding resentments towards the US. The interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy during these administrations illustrates the numerous components that have shaped national and international relations in South Korea, impacting both public sentiment and policy direction.

6. Soft Power

The increasing emphasis on soft power by both the United States and South Korea signifies a notable shift in international relations strategies, highlighting the ability to sway others through cultural appeal, ideological principles, and policies rather than coercion. Soft power, by definition, utilizes a nation's products, values, and cultural assets to shape global perceptions and behaviors favorably, without resorting to direct pressure or authoritarian methods. Its effectiveness lies in its subtle capacity to influence preferences through attraction and appeal, operating on the premise that shaping individuals' choices and attitudes through voluntary engagement with a country's cultural or educational offerings can be more enduring and less contentious than traditional hard power approaches. This mechanism has particularly impacted sectors such as tourism and international education, with countries boasting attractive educational systems and cultural experiences often witnessing increased tourist influx and

[177] Kalinowski, Thomas, and Sang-young Rhyu. "2015 South Korea Country Report." *Sustainable Governance Indicators*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 24-27, 2015, www.sgi-network.org/docs/2015/country/SGI2015_South_Korea.pdf.

foreign student enrollment, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the host country's values and perspectives.[178]

In South Korea, the growth of soft power has not only enhanced international visibility and influence but has also bolstered national pride. By projecting its cultural uniqueness and innovations onto the global stage, South Korea has fostered a sense of security in its national identity, making its citizens feel less threatened by external cultural influences.[179] This rise in cultural self-confidence, however, has faced challenges, particularly from China. In line with remarks from Hu Jintao in 2007 about boosting Chinese soft power to coincide with the country's hard power, China's renewed aggressive cultural diplomacy efforts have occasionally placed pressure on regional patterns.[180] Consequently, since the mid 2000's, the Korean Wave has been viewed by some as an economic threat with an imbalance of imported goods on China's end without reciprocity from South Korea. Additional riffs occurring over historical disputes and the misrepresentation of cultural heritage origins have further driven a wedge in the two countries soft power dynamics. [181]

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[178] Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs, 2004.

[179] Tudor, Daniel. "'Beyond Security: South Korea's Soft Power and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance in a Post-Pandemic World' Transcript." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 18 Oct. 2021, www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-security-south-koreas-soft-power-and-future-us-rok-alliance-post-pandemic-world.

[180] Nye, Joseph S. "'Beyond Security: South Korea's Soft Power and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance in a Post-Pandemic World' Transcript." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 18 Oct. 2021, www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-security-south-koreas-soft-power-and-future-us-rok-alliance-post-pandemic-world.

[181] Jang, Soo Hyun. "The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship." *Journal of International and Area Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, pp. 107–109, https://s-

In contrast to China, the United States has enjoyed a heightened period of the positive effects of soft power interactions since the election of President Obama. An illustrative example of effective American soft power in Korea was the tenure of Ambassador Mark Lippert, who began his service in 2014. Despite being stabbed by national extremist Kim Ki Jong in 2015—a perpetrator motivated by opposition to US-Korea policies on unification—Lippert received widespread public sympathy and support. Kim claimed his actions were in protest of the ongoing joint military exercises conducted by the US and South Korea. However, the Korean public's response, which involved praising Lippert and vilifying his assailant, marked a significant public sentiment shift, indicative of the deep cultural and diplomatic ties fostered between the two nations.[182]

The strategic cultivation of soft power has become particularly popular among conservative Korean political parties, who see it as a tool to strengthen South Korea's international standing while preserving national integrity. Additionally, the Korean Wave as a key political talking point has increased in prominence with each presidency since the Kim Dae Jung administration. This reveals a trend with conservative parties being more vocally pro cultural development for the global community while also consistently supporting increased budget spending for the cultivation of such Korean art forms. Given South Korea's historical susceptibility to foreign influence, the ability to assert a distinct cultural identity and showcase

space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/96546/1/7.The-Korean-Wave-and-Its-Implications-for-the-Korea-China-Relationship_Soo-Hyun-Jang.pdf.

[182] BBC. "South Korea Jails Man for Stabbing US Ambassador Mark Lippert." *BBC News*, 11 Sept. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34217371.

indigenous qualities is a source of immense national pride and a critical component of its sovereign agenda.[183]

Rather than safely guarding the definition of traditional Korean culture, conservative parties are more interested in bolstering national pride via far-reaching channels of what can be labeled as Korean. This expansionist approach to defining the Korean cultural identity not only helps with national morale but also boosts the marketability of the country for future economic endeavors. Interestingly, only after 10 years of the emergence of Hallyu recognition by the Blue House in 1998 did a Korean president challenge the notion of Hallyu's narrow definition centered around popular culture. Both Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun directed their relatively few comments on the Korean Wave towards its positive assets for soft power and tourism as a factor in economic industrialization. However, some of the ambiguous topics concerning its relation to the Korean Wave trend first made an appearance in Lee Myung Bak's approach to Hallyu in 2008. Topics such as Korean food were not only pushed by him but his wife as well, establishing significance for the role of the first lady in cultural affairs. Hallyu's rise in South Korean politics reveals shifts that showcase conservative parties' emphasis on expanding global recognition rather than preserving a traditionally narrow view of what is considered 'Korean'. Overall, the expansion of soft power by the United States and South Korea underscores a broader trend in global diplomacy that prioritizes cultural influence and mutual understanding over coercive power, signaling a shift towards more sophisticated and sustainable forms of international engagement.[184]

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[183] Kim, Taeyoung; Jin, Dal Yong. "Cultural Policy in the Korean Wave: An Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy Embedded in Presidential Speeches." *International Journal of Communication,* Oct. 2016, pp. 5514-5534. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/22127012.v1

[184] Ibid.

7. Achievement of Goals

The final trend I examined concerns the realization of objectives articulated by the South Korean populace aimed at rectifying perceived inequalities within the Status of Forces Agreement. The US-ROK alliance has been subject to substantial transformation, influenced by shifting security imperatives, public sentiment, and environmental considerations. These factors have led to significant changes to the SOFA and the introduction of new Special Measures Agreements. These modifications are designed to redress public grievances and promote a more equal alliance, thereby demonstrating a more profound commitment to addressing bilateral challenges. This evolution emphasizes the responsiveness of the alliance to the evolving demands and concerns of the Korean public, fostering a more just and equitable bilateral relationship.

Starting with environmental concerns, significant strides were made in the early 2000s to address the impact of US military bases on the local environment and public health. In 2001, the "Memorandum of Special Understanding on Environmental Protection" was amended under SOFA, committing the US to compliance with environmental standards and promising to address any contaminants posing substantial endangerment to health. This was further reinforced by the "Joint Environmental Information Exchange and Access Procedures" in 2002, which allowed for environmental contamination investigations at USFK bases with responsibilities for remediation. In 2003, the "Procedures for Environmental Survey and Consultation on Remediation for Facilities and Areas Designated to be Granted or Returned" continued these initiatives,

increasing transparency and public engagement by allowing media access to information on environmental efforts, albeit with certain restrictions.[185]

In terms of military adjustments, 2004 marked a pivotal year with the shutdown of the Kooni Firing Range, which was a response to local concerns about noise and pollution. This period also saw the beginning of troop reductions, from 2004 to 2008, in line with the changing public sentiment in South Korea. Initially, the public favored a reduced foreign military presence, but perceptions shifted over time towards recognizing the necessity of US troops for security against North Korea. This reduction was conducted in close consultation with South Korea, reflecting a movement towards more equal cooperation within the alliance.[186] Furthermore, the period also witnessed the implementation of the Base Relocation and Land Partnership Plans, signed in 2004, which facilitated the transfer of fifteen out of twenty-six US military installations to the South Korean government.[187] Notably, the relocation of troops from

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[185] Bae, Yooil, and Heejin Han. "Reality Revealed: U.S. Military Bases, Environmental Impacts, and Civil Society in South Korea." *Proving Grounds: Militarized Landscapes, Weapons Testing, and the Environmental Impact of U.S. Bases,* University of Washington Press, Seattle, Washington, 2015, pp. 211–238.

[186] Jonsson, Gabriel. "The Peace-Keeping Role of the American Troops in South Korea." *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies,* vol. 20, no. 1, 2011, pp. 155–182, https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8899/7/0001477340.pdf.

[187] Leeker, Jacqueline. "USFK Basing and Relocation Program, 주한미군기지 이전 프로그램." *United States Forces Korea,* 17 Sept. 2019, www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/1963637/usfk-basing-and-relocation-program/.

Seoul to Camp Humphreys spurred protests, but tensions eased as affected residents accepted compensation and relocated.[188]

The 2011 amendment to the SOFA addressed criminal jurisdiction issues by modestly expanding Korean jurisdiction over certain cases involving US personnel. This amendment was part of a series of ongoing annual discussions held by the US-ROK joint committee, which focuses on refining SOFA to better address contemporary challenges.[189] Additionally, this committee has played a crucial role in responding promptly to environmental and public health concerns, as demonstrated during the 2015 anthrax incident. In contrast to the typically slower responses to such issues, the committee's swift action in this case underscored an enhanced responsiveness to environmental and health challenges within the US-ROK military framework. Although there were criticisms from opponents of the Park administration regarding the timeliness of the response,[190] the resolution of the incident within a few months marked a significant improvement over previous efforts, highlighting a concerted effort to enhance communication and safety protocols concerning the shipment of potentially hazardous materials.

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[188] Satkowski, Stephen. "New 'Footprint' Emerging in Korea for U.S. Military." *US Army Corps of Engineers,* 19 Sept. 2014, www.pof.usace.army.mil/Media/News/Article/499855/new-footprint-emerging-in-korea-for-us-military/.

[189] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea. "Sofa Joint Committee Agrees on a New Framework on Criminal Procedures." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea,* 23 May 2012, www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=311159&srchFr=&amp%3BsrchTo=&amp%3BsrchWord=Outcome&amp%3BsrchTp=&amp%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_1=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_2=0&amp%3Bcompany_cd=&amp%3Bcompany_nm=&page=548&titleNm=.

[190] Kim, Ji-hoon. "Administration Under Fire in Wake of Tepid Response to Anthrax Delivery." *Hankyoreh*, 19 Oct. 2019, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/693908.html.

This proactive approach reflects a broader commitment to addressing the concerns of the Korean public and improving the operational aspects of the US-ROK alliance.

These chronological developments illustrate the complex evolution of the US-ROK military and diplomatic engagements, highlighting an increasing focus on environmental safety, equitable legal practices, and the strategic imperatives of regional security and alliance solidarity. However, it is important to remember that adding amendments doesn't always mean the new directives will be carried out. Instead, they act as a show of effort to address public concerns, but don't necessarily need to work as an effective remedy to quell public criticism.[191]

VI) Policy Implications and Recommendations

While governmental efforts have been made to address public grievances, these initiatives often appear more symbolic than substantive. Legislative measures enacted by the United States and reforms to the Status of Forces Agreement frequently fall short of their intended objectives due to a failure to address fundamental issues and a lack of effective implementation strategies. Instead of serving as comprehensive solutions, these reforms merely offer temporary fixes to deep-seated problems, akin to applying a bandage to a critical wound.[192] Presently, the robust relationship between the United States and South Korea may mitigate concerns; however, it is imperative to recognize that such interdependency is not immune to

[191] Bae, Yooil, and Heejin Han. "Reality Revealed: U.S. Military Bases, Environmental Impacts, and Civil Society in South Korea." *Proving Grounds: Militarized Landscapes, Weapons Testing*

[192] Lee, Tae-Hoon. "Seoul to Toughen Rules on US Military Crimes." *The Korea Times*, 17 Nov. 2011, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/06/113_99004.html.

erosion, necessitating proactive consideration of alternative approaches to prevent a potential breakdown in the alliance.

One radical approach to address the systemic issues inherent in the Status of Forces Agreement could entail a comprehensive overhaul of the existing framework. From its inception, the agreement has been characterized by an unequal power dynamic that disproportionately favors US interests, thereby presenting significant challenges for South Korea in achieving genuine satisfaction within the current arrangement. The asymmetrical nature of the agreement, which grants extensive legal privileges and immunities to US military personnel, while affording limited recourse to South Korean authorities in cases of misconduct, underscores the inherent imbalance. However, while a complete overhaul of the SOFA framework theoretically holds the potential to rectify these disparities and promote a more equitable distribution of legal military affairs between the two nations, such a proposition faces considerable obstacles, particularly in garnering US consent.[193]

The United States, as the dominant party in the alliance, has historically wielded considerable influence in shaping the terms of the SOFA to align with its strategic interests and military objectives. Therefore, any proposal for a fundamental restructuring of the agreement that entails relinquishing US dominance is likely to encounter significant resistance from US policymakers and military officials. Moreover, given the strategic importance of the US military presence in South Korea as a deterrent against regional threats, including North Korea, US policymakers may perceive any dilution of their authority under the SOFA as detrimental to their

[193] Song, Sang-ho. "(Yonhap Interview) Ex-Pentagon Official Stresses Need for War Plan Rethink, Swift OPCON Transfer, USFK Overhaul." *Yonhap News Agency*, 7 May 2024, en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240508000300315.

national security interests. In light of these challenges, an alternative strategy emerges, which involves the implementation of supplemental agreements to address deficiencies in the original SOFA document. Rather than attempting to overhaul the entire framework, supplemental agreements offer a pragmatic and incremental approach to mitigating the shortcomings of the existing arrangement. These agreements could target specific areas of concern, such as enhancing accountability mechanisms for US military personnel, improving environmental stewardship around US military installations, and clarifying jurisdictional issues related to legal proceedings involving military personnel.

Addressing the financial burden of maintaining the US military presence in South Korea is crucial, especially with declining anti-American sentiments. The issue of cost-sharing has become increasingly contentious as rising costs raise concerns about the sustainability of the US military presence, potentially prompting reassessment. Given the strategic importance of US military deterrence in the region, any withdrawal could significantly impact regional stability. Therefore, while SOFA issues have lessened, prioritizing equitable cost-sharing is essential for a robust bilateral military alliance.[194]

The allies must establish a clear system for financial contributions to the peninsula's security, starting with defining shared principles. They need to determine if costs should be fairly distributed and what categories of support should be included. These principles must be agreed upon before negotiations and should not be altered without mutual consent. For US forces stationed in Korea, it's vital to establish a defined approach. Discussions should center on

[194] Park, Won Gon. "A Challenge for the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Defense Cost-Sharing." *East Asia Institute,* July 2013, www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng_report/2013091110583697.pdf.

whether the US should benefit financially from its presence or if only incremental costs, exceeding domestic deployment expenses, should be shared. Negotiations must also address specific expenses unique to Korea. Both South Korea and the US need transparent accounting of all expenditures to align with their respective national military commands and authorities.[195]

The OPCON transition is another critical issue. Historically, perceptions of US control over ROK forces have driven desires for Korean military sovereignty. Conversely, some in the US believe the ROK should ensure its own defense, possibly leading to calls for troop withdrawal or increased financial contributions from South Korea after the transition. Negotiations must address potential accusations regarding the "Pershing Rule," which prohibits US troops from being under foreign command, to avoid political pressures for withdrawal. Clear communication of the combined military force's structure and purpose is essential. Emphasizing the effectiveness of a combined command, the maturity of ROK military leadership, and the shared ownership of the command can help mitigate misunderstandings. Equitable cost-sharing and a clear understanding of the OPCON transition are vital. Establishing shared principles, transparently addressing costs, and effectively communicating the combined command structure will help maintain a strong bilateral military alliance and ensure regional stability.[196]

Another pressing issue that warrants attention in supplemental agreements is the environmental impact of American military camps and testing sites on the Korean peninsula. While previous amendments have been made to address environmental concerns, these efforts

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[195] Maxwell, David. “Burden-Sharing in the U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Finding Balance.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 27 Feb. 2020, www.cfr.org/blog/burden-sharing-us-south-korea-alliance-finding-balance.

[196] Ibid.

have proven ineffective due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms and incentives for compliance. As a result, new measures could be implemented to hold the US accountable for its environmental obligations, such as imposing fines for non-compliance with environmental standards and requiring regular environmental impact assessments. Joint environmental protection initiatives could also be established to foster cooperation and shared responsibility.[197]

Furthermore, addressing jurisdictional issues posed by convicted military personnel and their families stationed in South Korea is essential for fostering trust and equity in the alliance. While the US has a legitimate interest in safeguarding the rights of its military personnel and their families, excluding South Korea from the decision-making process undermines its autonomy and exacerbates longstanding tensions. Therefore, proposing the establishment of a joint court comprising American and Korean judiciary members could provide a forum for fair and impartial adjudication of legal proceedings involving military personnel. Such a joint court would ensure that both sides have an equal voice in the legal process, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability within the alliance while safeguarding the rights of all parties involved. Additionally, an unaffiliated third-party member could be recruited to offer a less-biased perspective on the case and ensure impartiality. At the community level, establishing a

[197] Lee, Jahng-hee. "Commentary: The Sofa's Environmental Clause Must Be Fully Amended." *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 2 June 2011, english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201106021644247&code=790000.

local body where citizens can voice their grievances would provide a more effective and less disruptive method for ensuring their concerns are heard.[198]

Transitioning to a discussion on current measures, several avenues exist for reaffirming the resilience of the US-ROK military alliance and perpetuating the significance of SOFA through leveraging established frameworks. Firstly, the continuation of joint military exercises and intelligence sharing represents a cornerstone of cooperation between the two nations. These exercises not only bolster mutual trust but also enhance interoperability, ensuring seamless coordination in the event of a security threat. Moreover, intelligence sharing serves as a vital tool in preempting cyber security breaches and detecting terrorism threats, underscoring the reciprocal nature of the alliance's security measures. The symbiotic relationship extends beyond security concerns, encompassing cultural and economic exchanges that further solidify the partnership. Through the exchange of ideas, values, and economic cooperation, South Korea and the US continually identify synergies that enable them to navigate shared challenges effectively. By leveraging these interconnected security measures and the robust foundation of the alliance, both nations are well-positioned to explore new avenues of collaboration and reinforce their enduring partnership.[199]

The United States and South Korea are poised to maintain robust relations, particularly amidst persistent threats from North Korea and China, which have become increasingly

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[198] Smith, Sheila A. "Shifting Terrain: The Domestic Politics of the U.S. Military Presence in Asia." *East-West Center*, Mar. 2006, www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/fileadmin/stored/misc/SR00804NationalPolicy.pdf.

[199] U.S. Department of Defense. "Defense Vision of the U.S.-ROK Alliance." *U.S. Department of Defense,* 13 Nov. 2023, www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3586528/defense-vision-of-the-us-rok-alliance/.

ingrained in daily life. This trend is likely to persist as long as regional security concerns remain paramount and the United States retains its global power status. Therefore, it is in the best interest of both countries to prioritize the strengthening of their bilateral alliance and address any existing shortcomings that could potentially undermine their relationship in the future. While there is a possibility that this partnership may not be as crucial in the distant future, foreseeable circumstances suggest otherwise. The primary threat to this alliance currently is the potential shift of the United States towards far-right politics that have recently seen an uptick in isolationist favorability.[200] However, as long as the United States upholds its democratic values and commitment to stabilizing East Asia, the alliance is likely to remain resilient on the US side. Similarly, South Korea's positive sentiments towards the US and efforts to assert more sovereignty can help sustain the alliance. However, South Korea's decision to pursue nuclear weapons could jeopardize the alliance by fueling distrust and escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula, potentially leading to a nuclear conflict—an outcome that the United States seeks to avoid.[201] Therefore, maintaining transparency and cooperation remains of utmost importance to avoid escalating SOFA issues in the future. Looking ahead, the alliance between the United States and South Korea will continue to play a crucial role in safeguarding democracy and stability in East Asia.

VII) Suggestions for Future Studies

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To deepen our understanding of the ongoing evolution of the US-ROK SOFA and its implications within the broader geopolitical landscape, future studies could take several directions. These suggestions aim to bridge current findings with emerging global debates and shifting political landscapes, both domestically and internationally.

Expansion of Data and Trends: Future research should expand the temporal scope of data collection to include more recent developments under new presidential administrations in both the United States and South Korea. This expansion would allow for an analysis of how news publication trends have adapted to subsequent leaders' leadership styles and foreign policy decisions. Moreover, additional survey polls would provide valuable insights into the changing sentiments of local populations, particularly how their views on US military presence and the SOFA agreement fluctuate in response to the evolving global order.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: As South Korea continues to globalize its cultural exports, further studies could explore the extension of Hallyu beyond traditional media to include new emerging sectors. Understanding how these elements contribute to shaping a global Korean identity could explain their role in enhancing Korea's soft power. This research could assess how Korea’s cultural diplomacy is strategically utilized to bolster its international standing and influence global audiences.

Impact of Political Changes in the US and South Korea: The election of Donald Trump and his distinct foreign policy approach brought new points of contention to the US-ROK relationship. Analyzing his administration's impact, particularly his threats to reduce troop presence in South Korea, could reveal how such external pressures influence SOFA negotiations and OPCON transfers. Similarly, we could study the election of Moon Jae-in in South Korea and

his progressive agenda against a conservative US administration to comprehend their impact on bilateral tensions and military cooperation.

Trilateral Military Cooperation: The breakdown and rebuilding of ROK-Japan relations should be further studied, as it remains the weakest link in the US-ROK-Japan partnership. As alliances shift and expand, the growing trilateral relationship between the US, South Korea, and Japan, exemplified by summits like those at Camp David, warrants a focused study on how these partnerships foster joint military operations and strategic alignments in response to regional threats.

Trade Wars and Military Issues: The intersection of trade disputes and military strategies is another crucial area for research. Understanding how trade wars influence military policies and alliances could provide insights into the broader implications of economic conflicts for security arrangements.

Global Conflicts and US Protection: With rising tensions in regions like Taiwan and Ukraine, there is a potential increase in the perceived need for US military protection. Research could explore whether these global conflicts encourage a stronger reliance on SOFA agreements and discourage movements towards their repeal.

Environmental and Health Crises: Investigating how environmental provisions within the SOFA have progressed, along with the impact of global health crises like COVID-19 on US-Korea relations, could provide a comprehensive view of non-traditional security issues affecting bilateral military cooperation.

These suggested areas for future studies would not only enhance our understanding of the emerging dynamics shaping US-ROK military and diplomatic relations but also contribute to

policy discussions and strategic planning as both nations navigate their roles in a rapidly changing global context.

VIII) Conclusion

While there has been a clear trend in the decrease of Status of Forces Agreement related protests by the South Korean public from 2000 to 2015, issues of equality in the US-ROK alliance still occur. However, the broader strengthening of this bilateral relationship, along with souring relations with North Korea and China, partially accounts for their lack of presence in societal discourse. The force of progressive movements in conjunction with the ruling democratic party entering 2000 set the precedent for the 21st century. Reduced tensions with North Korea posed the question of whether US military presence was still necessary, especially with the harm they caused to the population and surrounding environment. China had yet to emerge as a threat because its economic takeoff was still in the early stages. Therefore, the United States seemed to be holding on to an unequal agreement in order to keep control over South Korea rather than caring about regional security. As a result of supporting the war effort in Iraq, the first wave of improved relations helped shift opinion at the political level about the necessity of US support. The larger, second wave occurred more gradually, with a more effective means of convincing the public. With the growth of China as an economic giant harboring expansionist tendencies as well as the increased acts of hostility by North Korea, negative public opinion has keenly adapted to the new perceived threats.

Although the sentiment of international relations contributes greatly to such a shift, we must also take into account the evolution of the demographic makeup of Korean society as well as the domestic factors that shaped public opinion, such as media content and consumerist tendencies. The decline in South Korea's birth rate, the influx of foreigners, the choice of more

Koreans to live abroad, and the granting of more political rights to the nationalized Korean population will lead to a unique transformation of the country's identity and nationalism. Within this more globalized era, we can see a shift in attempting to secure a number of alliances beyond the traditional East Asian partners. Additionally, the influence of Korea's soft power continues to make the country seem more attractive and expand economically while helping the country establish its own unique traditions and culture. This helps to create great national pride, elevate the country's recognition on the global stage, and establish its economic and political benefits. Through the population's growing diversity and national pride in its soft power, there has been an increased ability to vouch for the country's demands both at home and while receiving more attention abroad.

As the bilateral relationship thrives, the growing international influence of South Korea and the media's framing of the public's perceived largest concerns have led to a shift away from the belief that the United States is a threat to sovereignty. As I have argued thus far, a multitude of conditions must come together to not only bring SOFA-related reform to the forefront, but also facilitate effective change. While the early 2000's had these conditions met, by 2015, an emergence of more pressing issues had to be addressed first. It is not because issues with the US military haven't occurred since or that the instances are necessarily reducing, but rather because the Status of Forces Agreement no longer poses a risk on the same scale as regional threat factors. Concurrently, cost burden sharing has emerged as a more prominent topic of conversation, alongside discussions of OPCON transfer and the broader evolution of US-South Korea relations. Moving forward, this position may change if the US becomes the main target of scrutiny again, either through a growth in power or the reduction of legitimacy in the country's role as a global superpower.

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